Breaching Borders: An Investigation into Painting the News

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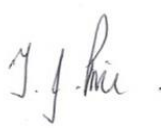

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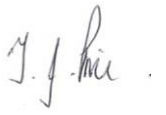

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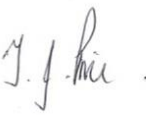

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Fig. 17. Francis Alÿs, *New York Triptych*, 1995-96. Oil on canvas, enamel on metal series consisting of one painting by Alÿs (left) and sign paintings by Enrique Huerta (centre) and Emilio Rivera (right). Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. Courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

Fig. 18. *Untitled,* 2016. Oil on linen, 36 x 30 cm.

Fig. 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23. *All That I Have*, 2017-19. Oil on canvas, various dimensions.

Fig. 24. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996. Photographic transparency. From I.B.Tauris publishers.

Fig. 25. Gerhard Richter, *Funeral*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm. From Storr 2000. ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

Fig. 26. *Different Points of View*, 2016. Oil on linen diptych, 183 x 92 cm each.

Fig. 27. *Are We There*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 183 x 152 cm.

Fig. 28. Ben Quilty, *High Tide Mark*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 170.5 x 160.4 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. ©Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

Fig. 29. *Study in Gold*, 2016. Oil on linen, 168 x 112 cm.

Fig. 30. *Study in Gold I*, 2017. Oil on linen, 112 x 92 cm.

Fig. 31. *Take My Hand*, 2017-18, Oil on canvas triptych, two panels of 183 x 92 cm and one of 183 x 123 cm.

Fig. 32. Luc Tuymans, *Demolition,* 2005. Oil on canvas, 165 x 113 cm. Photo by Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York, London.

Fig. 33. Yan Pei-Ming, *Les Temps Modernes*, 2015. Oil on canvas diptych, 280 x 400 cm each. ©Yan Pei-Ming/ADAGP, Paris, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Photo Fondation Louis Vuitton/Martin Argyroglo.

Fig. 34. Francisco de Goya , *Peregrinación a la Fuente de San Isidro*, 1819-23. Oil mural transferred to canvas, 140 x 438 cm. ©Museo Nacional del Prado.

Fig. 35. *Wrong Time, Wrong Place*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

Fig. 36. *Parallel Lines*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 168 x 168 cm.

Fig. 37. *Parallel Lines I*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.

Fig. 38. *Walk on By*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

Fig. 39 and 40. Gérard Fromanger, *En révolte à la prison de Toul I* and *II*, 1974. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. From Deleuze & Foucault 1999.

Fig. 41. Gerhard Richter, *September (Ed.139)*, 2009. Print between glass, 66 x 89.8 cm. Collection Dallas Museum of Art, USA. ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

Fig. 42. Helen Johnson, *A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, wood. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Photo by Tania Price.

Fig. 43 and 44. Two versions of *What Should We Take*, 2016 and 2018. Oil on canvas, 138 x 122 cm each.

Fig. 45. Exhibition view of *Take My Hand* at Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 2018. Photo by Tania Price.

Fig. 46. *London Calling*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 168 x 101 cm.

Fig. 47. *Back to the Border*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 122 x 61.5 cm.

Fig. 48. Luc Tuymans, *The Arena*, 2017. Fresco, installation view at MSK Ghent. Photo by Tania Price.

Fig. 49. *Study in Gold IV*, 2018-19. Oil on canvas, 153 x 122 cm.

Fig. 50. *Study in Gold V*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 153 x 96.5 cm.

Fig. 51. *Study in Gold III*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 112 x 92 cm.

Fig. 52. Julie Mehretu, *Conjured Parts (Syria), Aleppo and Damascus*, 2016. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 305.4 cm. ©Julie Mehretu. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of the artist, White Cube, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Abstract

Breaching Borders investigates what happens when photographs of news events of global significance are used as the basis for painting. It asks: what can painting bring to the communication and comprehension of crisis situations that have already been visually represented in the news media? What happens in the translation from media image to paint on canvas? This research project identifies the inherent distancing effect of media imagery and explores ways in which painting can help to close the physical and psychological gap between us, as passive consumers, and the circumstances of others. It considers how painting can draw attention to the nature of our relationship with the subject matter of our daily news, and how it can engage us with global issues in a way that invites acknowledgement of our part in a shared world. The body of work developed for this research project offers viewers an opportunity to reconsider their relationship to issues associated with the global refugee crisis.

The project is situated in a field of art practice that addresses the representation of global crises and current affairs. It references two groups of artists: those who base paintings on images explicitly sourced from news media, such as Marlene Dumas, Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans; and those whose work reflects personal rather than mediated experiences of newsworthy issues, such as Richard Mosse, Alfredo Jaar and Ben Quilty. These artists' various approaches to the representation of traumatic and contentious events are examined in conjunction with the ideas of art historian and cultural critic T. J. Demos, who calls for an affective artistic experience to help avoid objectification, and of Peter Geimer, who raises questions around the media-criticality of painting from photography. To add to this field, the project explores and identifies formal devices that encourage viewers to consider the subject matter in ways that extend beyond the mere recognition of events that have happened elsewhere. These devices operate to shift the viewer's self-positioning in relation to the represented scene and, in doing so, invite them to engage with artist and subject matter as an active participant.

The practical research is founded on painting from photographs or video stills that represent issues associated with the global refugee crisis. The work explores themes associated with the subject matter of the photographs, including movement

and constraint. Themes related to the ways in which we develop views on world events, such as distance, perspective, context and representation, have also been tested in the studio in conjunction with the theories of Martin Heidegger, David Levi Strauss and Jacques Rancière. Based on the concept that movement within painting is linked to potential, as proposed by Michel Foucault and Gottfried Boehm, the research identifies strategies that can enhance painting's ability to suggest alternative interpretations of, and possibilities for, the events depicted. To suggest potential, as well as to reinforce the uncertainty and instability inherent in the situations portrayed, elements are repeated within and across works, contextual information is removed, viewpoints shift, and areas of white canvas and coloured ground are left exposed, fracturing the illusion of a complete or unified scene. The formal devices extend to the exhibition context, establishing a connection between the staging of art and the provisional nature of migration. These strategies are supported by Barbara Bolt's notion of performativity, which posits that a painter interacts with all elements of the painting process in the form of a dynamic encounter, and Paul Crowther's proposition that the work enables the formation of a space in which new meaning can be created.

The project reveals how painting can enable participation in significant world events. It argues that the artist's experience of painting real situations, and the viewer's engagement with painting through its materiality and staging, makes them both active participants in the issues being addressed. In giving potential to how a pictured event can continue to play out, the work offers a form of collaboration between artist and audience. The pictorial devices and treatment of the subject matter in the paintings that comprise this project's thesis invite viewers to look beyond a surface view of events and contemplate more deeply their relationship to the underlying issues. By evoking movement, provisionality and potential, they demonstrate that painting has the power to include both artist and viewer, and alert them to their part in our shared humanity.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 How it started

The partially submerged inflatable dinghy tied to a cleat on the concrete harbour wall would have escaped my attention had our Turkish skipper not needed us to vouch for his credentials with the local Greek authorities. As we walked to the far side of the harbour to visit the police station, which for a period had doubled as a refugee processing centre, I caught a glimpse of the abandoned vessel. One side of the boat's back-end was submerged, with sea water covering the wooden seats, a couple of empty water bottles and a plastic sandal floating between them. In another place, at another time, this prosaic scene would not have caused me to stop. Here though, in the main port of the small Greek island of Symi, near the south-west coast of Turkey, I knew I was looking at a vessel that had been used by refugees attempting to make a dangerous border crossing. I had no way of knowing if they had made it safely to Greek shores and been processed through the nearby station, or if the authorities had towed the boat in after it had encountered difficulties. I didn't, and couldn't, know the fate of the boat's passengers, but I thought about what might have transpired. And I took a photograph.

Five months before this holiday, I had embarked on the research project that is the subject of this exegesis. The project began with an intention to investigate what happens when photographs of news events are used as the basis of paintings: what happens in the translation from media image to paint on canvas? I had decided to focus on media images of what, by that stage, had become a massive crisis of refugees fleeing the Middle East via Turkey by boat to Greece, and from northern African shores to Italy. My choice of subject matter had less to do with personal interest than a recognition that the global issue of mass migration was becoming increasingly complex, overwhelming and insoluble. Refugees and migrants across the world were the subject of daily media coverage; issues associated with them were at the centre of

political debate and conflict in my home country of Australia, throughout Europe and in North America.

The research was stimulated by my interest in how the daily mainstream media addresses major world issues, and how we, as consumers of the media, understand, absorb, react to, respond to or ignore the information we are provided with. I started my professional life as a journalist and have had a career in and around the media. The way issues play out—how people respond to what they hear, read and see, and develop views on things—has been central to my working life. As my commitment to painting developed, it seemed natural to examine how this other type of media operated in representing and communicating reality. In my Honours year of a Fine Arts degree, I made work based on media images that portrayed people engaged in ritualistic or belief-based activities, such as a mid-winter plunge into a cross-shaped hole in the frozen surface of an Eastern European lake. This was the start of my research into the agency of painting. The Breaching Borders project continues and expands this line of investigation, with a focus on what painting can bring to the communication of issues and news events.

1.2 Aims, objectives and a central argument

A central aim of this research was to investigate how painting could provide an experience of major world issues from which we are, for the most part, removed. Visual information about significant global events and situations affecting people in other parts of the world is produced and circulated constantly by the news media. Implicit in this mediated experience of reality, however, is the distance between us, as media consumers, and the pictured events. A key objective of the project, therefore, was to determine how painting could reduce the physical and psychological distance between us, as viewers, and the circumstances of others—the people at the centre of a story occurring elsewhere. In trying to diminish this sense of distance, I was exploring how painting could engage viewers with the often contentious and difficult subject matter of their daily news and invite acknowledgement of their part in our unsettled world. I set out to determine what might be required to create and exhibit paintings

that encourage a deeper contemplation of our relationship with major global issues and the people affected by them.

At the core of the subject matter on which I have based the paintings is the concept of movement in the form of human migration. The project investigated how paintings and their display could reflect and reinforce a sense of motion and its implication of tension, instability and temporality. Central to the research was how painting could evoke consideration of the circumstances and complexities associated with a pictured event. It aimed to investigate how painting could suggest situations unfolding over time, before and after the click of a camera shutter. The research revealed that generating a sense of movement through painting might to do more than simply reflect the nature of the subject matter; it could also suggest the possibility of alternative courses of action. If a pictured situation was not seen to be fixed or absolute, if a painting could evoke a sense that its elements were still in motion, or that it might continue to evolve, then it might also indicate potential for different outcomes and other opportunities.

Accepting this premise, a painting, unlike its photographic source, can operate as a dynamic encounter, inviting both artist and viewer to play a role in constructing new possibilities. In this way, I argue, the processes of creating and viewing a painting become performative, and the performance unites all participants with the subject matter of the image. When the subject matter is drawn from newsworthy events occurring in the world, and relates to the circumstances of people affected by the broader issues, painting can meaningfully engage artist and viewer in those events and situations. The concept of a painting giving potential to alternative outcomes and inviting a viewer to participate in the formulation of other possibilities extends the idea of the performative nature of painting beyond the studio to include the audience experience, whereby a viewer can continue the story and, in doing so, acknowledge their connection to otherwise distant people and their circumstances—their part in a shared humanity.

As a result of research conducted both in and outside the studio, I argue that painting based on real events can operate actively and dynamically to connect artist and viewer with world events. Through formal strategies that evoke a sense of

movement and prioritise the performative nature of the medium, painting can help overcome the distance between “us” and “them”; painting can enable engagement with, and participation in, the realities of our world.

This research project is also concerned with how and why artists continue to represent events and situations occurring around the world, given the efficacy of photography in communicating visual information. Specifically, it investigated what painting might bring to subject matter that is already visually represented and communicated in documentary form. It asks what paintings based on images that are already in circulation can add to our experience of an issue at a time when we are exposed to a continual and limitless stream of visual imagery.

As the research progressed, I realised that I was considering not only what value painting could add to the representation of things that happen in the world, but also the role it might play in how we come to know and understand those things. I was drawn to journalism initially because it gave me access to situations, issues and events that most people rarely get close to; it provided an intensity of experience that is difficult to find in our everyday lives. However, the product of that journalistic engagement—the articles, video clips and photographs that are pumped out in a 24-hour news cycle—asks for little more than passive acceptance. The view of a media-inured public is common amongst many of the theorists I read, and it was in response to them that I identified my central motivation and the project’s core objective. I realised that I wanted to determine how painting might overcome the usual passive response of a media consumer and, rather, generate a stronger sense of engagement—a more intense experience. As the project developed, I came to focus increasingly on the role of experience in how we relate to what is going on in the world. The way in which we view world events on our digital screens; commentary and arguments in relation to distressing and complex issues; the process of painting itself; actual encounters with people, events and places associated with the issues; the experiences of others that we read about or watch in documentaries; the myriad works of art viewed online, in books and in person—all these types of experience contribute to how we process information and “see” things. All of them have contributed to this research.

From my experience of travelling in regions directly impacted by refugee activity, I also tested the difference between painting from media photographs and painting from photographs I had taken myself, which reflect my more direct engagement with a situation. As part of this concern, I considered questions around media criticality; that is, whether artwork based on photographic imagery is about the subject matter of the photograph or, rather, about the role and nature of the media image. The perspective from and context in which events and issues are viewed is important in determining the relationship between audience and subject matter. As part of the research, I examined how shifts in distance, perspective and context of the subject matter of paintings, as well as the different ways of exhibiting paintings, might alter the way in which images are interpreted.

1.3 The theory

This research is predicated on connections made between three key theoretical propositions. Paul Crowther (1993, p. 29) posits the concept of an "existential space" in which a viewer generates new meaning from a painting, the nature of which depends on the viewer's entire history and past experiences. The artist exists in this space as well, having put forward a work that a viewer is able to "experientially appropriate" and, in doing so, become "reintegrated" with things going on in the world (Crowther 1993, pp. 209-210). Barbara Bolt (2004) conceives of painting as performative, with all elements of the painting process playing a role. Inspired by Bolt, my project extends Crowther's position to suggest active and dynamic participation by the artist in the circumstances of the subject matter referred to in a painting. These ideas, combined with Michel Foucault's (Deleuze & Foucault 1999) concept of a painting generating possibilities and opportunities beyond the fixed view of an event as captured in a news photograph, give rise to my central argument: that painting based on real events can give agency to both artist and viewer in relation to world affairs; it can facilitate an active engagement with things going on in the world. I argue that in creating and presenting paintings based on an issue—in this case, mass migration and associated dilemmas—the painter can offer a way in which new

understanding and knowledge related to an issue might be generated. It is in the work itself, therefore, that the potential for new knowledge and alternative outcomes is located. What might be required of a painting to enable participation, unlock potential and operate dynamically to generate new outcomes is explored throughout this paper. An essential element is, as Crowther suggests, the unique and original contribution of the artist, and the personal history and experiences that the artist brings to the creation of the work.

Implicit in my argument is that paintings of real events operate differently from photographs, particularly mainstream, mass media imagery. While this project is not a criticism of media imagery, it was necessary to identify how media photography creates a distancing effect. Roland Barthes, Jacques Rancière, T. J. Demos, David Levi Strauss and Crowther are among the theorists who have contributed to my understanding of how media imagery operates to separate a viewer from the reality of a situation, and what might be required to overcome this inherent distancing effect.

The idea of a painting giving potential to its subject matter is central to my argument. Echoing Foucault, Gottfried Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018) relates the concept of potential to a viewer's ability to move elements of the work around in their mind to create something new. These ideas prompted me to consider what it is in paintings that might operate to trigger a sense of ongoing possibility and, therefore, what might be required to imbue a painting with a sense of potential. The concept of paintings being charged with life and taking on a role beyond their existence as art objects is supported by theories that draw parallels between the movement of people and the physical, time-based activity of painting and its exhibition. Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro make a direct connection between migration and art. This drew my attention to Jill Bennett's argument regarding the shared characteristics of migration and the temporary exhibition of art. Roslyn Deutsche's and Claire Bishop's theories about the inherently antagonistic nature of reality, and art being a means by which we can acknowledge and reconcile our place in an unstable world, underpin my understanding of the artist's role in representing the circumstances of others. While mass migration is, as theorists from Martin Heidegger to Nikos Papastergiadas assert, a defining characteristic of our time, and while it features as a regular news item and

subject of political debate, it is not something that affects the day-to-day reality of most of us. Unless we live near a border, it always seems to be occurring somewhere else. In recreating and reflecting the conditions of migration, as proposed by several of the theorists I have referenced, art can provide a mechanism for an audience to acknowledge—perhaps even feel part of—the inherent transient and unstable nature of the world.

Throughout this exegesis I discuss how, in trying to resolve the formal and technical problems of painting, I felt that I was mirroring my intellectual and emotional struggle with the actual issues—those associated with migration that are the subject matter of my images. Ultimately, it was Bolt's (2004, p. 50) notion of a dynamic "encounter" that occurs between all the elements involved in the production of a painting—tools, bodies, materials, knowledge, objects—that helped me understand what I was experiencing as an artist and, therefore, what it is that painting enables. The performative nature and interrelationship of all these elements, in the pursuit of an outcome that is a painting, offers a way in which the artist can participate in issues. Through the process of painting, alone in a studio, a painter can engage with the world—materially, bodily, cognitively. Painting from photographs does not offer solutions. Painting can, however, be a form of acknowledgement and acceptance of the conflicts and antagonisms of the world, of their ongoing, dynamic nature, even of our shared complicity in them.

1.4 The field

This project belongs to the field of painters for whom major events and issues—the stuff of worldwide news broadcasts and photographs—is the subject matter of their work. There are numerous painters working in this field and there is a vast amount of commentary about the significance of representing reality through art as opposed to mainstream media. In this exegesis I discuss only a small number of the many artists whose work addresses events and current affairs. I have selected them on the basis that their work is relevant to my key themes, aims and objectives. In particular, the painting and commentary of Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, and the extensive

critical and theoretical consideration of their work, have been useful in my investigation. Richter, Tuymans, and Marlene Dumas who I also discuss, paint from sourced media and other photographs, raising questions about the nature of representation and the circulation of imagery in a media-saturated world. While much of Richter's and Tuymans' work has an explicit connection to photography, Dumas' work is less concerned with the significance of the mediated image and more with creating an experience related to an event. Richter's work has also been useful in considering the degree to which a viewer requires a visual association with something already known to them in order to derive meaning from a painting.

While the primary rationale for representing current or historic events in paint has changed since the advent of photography—we no longer depend on painting, drawing or printmaking to inform us of events to which we would not otherwise have visual access—there is an important historical lineage to the contemporary field. Tuymans discusses his own contemporary referencing of Francisco de Goya's work, and it is Goya's depiction of a military execution, *The Third of May 1808* (1814) on which Édouard Manet—a key reference point for contemporary painters of events—based his experimental and innovative process for the representation of another contentious execution in the 1860s. Prior to Manet's work, Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19) provided a key shift in the nature of representation by drawing attention to the repercussions of human behaviour and the destructive effects of political power, rather than to the usual grand subjects of conventional history painting. A recognition of, and reference to, painting's lineage and conventions are used by many of the painters in this field as a way in which to connect contemporary commentary on events to issues that have confronted humanity over time. Painting's position as a traditional art form that we are conditioned to enjoy is exploited by many contemporary artists as a means by which to engage an audience in their work. I discuss a work by Francis Alÿs in this context.

The significant change in the nature of history painting reflects what David Green and Peter Seddon (2000, p. 3) describe as "the end of the recognition of endings", whereby the representation of history has become a form of repetition or ongoing documentary. While contemporary artistic representations of real events are

indebted to, and often reference conventional history painting, there are two notable differences to conventional depictions: their acknowledgement of the ever-present nature of the forces that drive events, and; the universality of themes that underpin them. This is central to my argument that it is not specific events that my paintings represent, but an opportunity to recognise and reflect on each individual's part in a shared humanity. While I acknowledge the relationship of this project to the traditional genre of history painting, its primary concern is with how painting might engage viewers with the circumstances of other people in a more meaningful manner than through media imagery. For this reason, I have limited discussion of key shifts in the history of history painting to those outlined by Robert Storr in his positioning of Richter's role in recuperating the genre, or as Green and Seddon (2000, p. 12) argue in relation to Richter, staging "a critical analysis of the more recent history of painting by means of painting".

Given that a central premise of the project is that mainstream media has the effect of distancing us from the reality of world events, I have also considered artists working in mediums other than paint, where their objective is to overcome the distance and more meaningfully engage an audience with the issues. For some of these artists, and for some painters responding to current affairs like war and migration, a necessary element of their work is the representation of what they have seen and experienced firsthand. This distinguishes them from artists painting overtly from photography. In this context, I discuss work by Alfredo Jaar, Richard Mosse and the Australian painter Ben Quilty.

In recent years there has been an explosion of artwork dealing with migration and refugee issues and I have referred to only a few examples in which the formal strategies employed are relevant to themes I have investigated. The nature of inevitable overlap between artists and activists addressing major issues, like migration, is complex and, while I have tried to avoid works that are intended primarily as a form of protest, my research has revealed that an artist's engagement with the subject matter necessarily entails a degree of personal investment that readily becomes entwined in the antagonistic and politicised debates relating to the issues. I have attempted as much as possible to examine the work of others from the perspective of

how it operates as art or, perhaps more aptly, as a visual or conceptual experience. I have also tried to avoid analysing where the line between reportage and active participation in an event lies, recognising that mainstream journalists, media photographers and documentary-makers, like artists, can be capable and desirous of crossing that line. Nor have I delved into the current fixation with what is termed *fake news* or any other deliberately manipulated or falsely constructed reportage, be it written or photographic.

1.5 My approach

In the following chapters I outline the way in which I began the decision-making processes of selecting and modifying source photographs, translating them onto a canvas support and recreating the images through paint. The most significant shift in the research occurred when I began using a vivid magenta hue as part of an initial layer of underpainting and left small gaps in the subsequent layers of paint so that areas of it remained exposed. The magenta contrasted strongly with the mostly earthy colours of my source photographs and ruptured any pretence the painting had of simply representing a scene. Rather, the work suggested layers of attempted representation that failed to unite into a fully resolved picture. As the studio work progressed, there were more gaps, missing pieces, colour that did not relate to a true representation, undefined edges and boundaries, images that did not portray the whole story, and canvases in which the content overlapped with others so that the story became fragmented and shifting.

Increasingly, over the course of the project, I recognised that the activity of painting could mirror the artist's feelings of frustration and impotence in relation to issues being addressed, as well as to the difficulty of adequately representing those issues. In wrestling with the formal concerns of a painting, the artist is simultaneously grappling with the issues themselves. It is the painter's experience in the studio, situated in the context of theoretical propositions relating to the distancing effect of images, movement, potential and performativity, that generates the proposition that the process of painting can enable a dynamic relationship between artist and things

going on in the world. The outcome of the performance—the flashes of unnatural colour, the undefined edges, the gaps and repetitions, the repositioning, all these pictorial devices that change the nature of a straightforward photographic representation—are where the potential for other outcomes exist. By engaging with these ruptures, by trying to make sense of them, the viewer, like the painter before them, can play their own unique role in imagining a version of events still unfolding.

I confronted the issue of migration daily as I trawled through media imagery. At various points in the project I brushed, albeit lightly, against the issues in more direct and personal circumstances. The various ways in which I have experienced and come into contact with migration-related issues has been central to my thinking about the studio work, and I have reflected as much on my engagement with events as on the relevant theory and contextual artwork. In painting from photographs taken by professional news photographers, or individuals caught up in situations, or by me for the purpose of this project, I have questioned how painting can draw attention to different ways of seeing, experiencing and comprehending. During the project I created work for two exhibitions, one year apart, each based on the theme of migration. These contributed to my thinking about how paintings operate over time and in different physical environments. I have also included descriptions of personal experiences in this exegesis because they informed my thinking about the studio work during the project and helped form my central proposition. They are not in chronological order and are not necessarily related to each other. Some of them are presented as stand-alone thoughts, reflections and memories because that is how they occurred to me during the course of the project.

Together with my experiences inside and outside the studio, the theory I read helped identify themes to explore through my painting practice and apply to my understanding of what was happening in the work. The themes relate to the nature of representation, the distancing effect of images, the perspective from and the context in which we view events, movement in and of art and of migrants, potentiality, and performativity as a means of participation and engagement. Due to the significance of these themes to my thinking about the studio work, I decided to structure this exegesis around them. Contextual theories and artwork, therefore, as well as my studio

practice, are threaded through the chapters and discussed in relation to their themes. The research has been a process of ideas informing approaches to practice, and of practice generating connections to theory. Due to my media background, it has been a highly personal response to concepts around how we come to know and understand things, and how and why we choose to represent real events and issues. There is an inevitable overlap between chapters and I have not sought to adhere to arbitrary boundaries. I regard the structuring of this exegesis as part of my methodology. As the project progressed, the connection between my growing need to take a less conventional and controlled approach and a sense of how we might more deeply understand and engage with the circumstances of others strengthened. The objective media operator, trained to process reality in a logical and formulaic manner, seemed to give way to something much less definable, uncertain—even implicated.

1.6 The chapters

Chapter Two addresses the historic role of painting in representing events and the shift that occurred with the advent of photography. A key concern of my research has been what the individual artist brings to an image. Inherent in this concern is the assumption that each and every painter brings something unique to their work, but does that unique contribution justify or explain the repeated representation of subject matter already pictured in other forms? Throughout the project I have queried the rationale for re-representing a photographic image through the medium of paint. In this chapter I discuss examples of artists, historical and contemporary, who continued, or continue, to portray real events after the advent of photography, which offers a far more efficient, reliable and factual vehicle for recording and reporting current affairs. Through examination of the work of contemporary painters like Dumas, Richter and Tuymans, I consider questions around media criticality—whether the work is about the subject matter or, rather, about the role of the media image in how we view events—and around how representative and figurative painting operates, or fails to operate, in a world characterised by the rapid and constant circulation of images. In order to determine what happens in the making and viewing of a painting based on a

newsworthy event, it was necessary to consider how media images work and how an artistic response to the same subject matter differs from reportage. This is discussed from my perspective as a former journalist, supported by theories including those of Crowther and Barthes. The dilemma, identified by Levi Strauss and Demos, amongst others, of conventional representation as a demonstration of superiority and form of objectification, is addressed with reference to a work by Mosse, who used specialist military surveillance technology to film the activities of refugee camp inhabitants and military exercises alike. I discuss my painting of the face of a Syrian child killed in an attack on her city from the perspective of my concerns about the ethics of representing other people's stories and tragedies. Also considered are my repeated attempts at painting a small, pink suitcase as a way to reflect the difficulty of adequately representing a situation that I could never really comprehend.

Chapter Three considers the themes of distance, perspective and context, all of which relate to how we see things, both literally and metaphorically. It addresses how we develop opinions and points of view on contested issues. The ideas of Heidegger and Henri Bergson in relation to the significance of self-positioning in giving genuine care and consideration to another's situation provided an initial way to approach my source photographs, transforming them from the perspective of a spectator to suggest a closer, more intimate experience. Rancière's theories about the distancing effect of representation, and how it might be overcome, were also central to my early thinking about how painting might offer a more inclusive and shared experience of something than was possible from our everyday viewing of media imagery. To pursue how we experience and come to know things, I considered the methods of Jaar and Quilty, both of whom had direct encounters and interaction with their subjects. By comparison, whether it was from sourcing media images or taking a photo in the wake of something happening, I was working from the residue of an event and not from direct contact. The context in which we view images is considered with reference to several paintings by Tuymans. I also discuss two of my paintings that depend, for their interpretation, on the context in which they are exhibited. The context in which we experience things in turn affects our perspective, or the way we interpret things, and I discuss how painting might draw attention to different and changing perspectives on

significant world issues. To test and reinforce these ideas in the studio research, I applied different perspectives and varying degrees of distance to compositions sourced from a single photograph.

Chapter Four considers concepts related to potential and movement, which I have come to understand as vital to the content of the paintings. Foucault's analysis of French artist Gérard Fromanger's paintings helped identify the significance of what was happening in the paintings in terms of communicating a sense of ongoing and alternative outcomes. As I became increasingly enamoured of the idea, espoused by Foucault and others, that a painting could intervene—if not in the outcome of a specific event, then in our understanding of the incomplete, uncertain nature of events—I tested techniques to suggest a sense of movement, potential and possibility. Movement and potential became increasingly important strategies to avoid some of the problems I discuss in relation to representation, such as objectification and an implicit sense of superiority. Based, in particular, on the ideas of Foucault and Boehm, movement and potential have become methodologies that can be applied in order to engage a viewer in the work. Strategies to encourage viewer engagement in the subject matter of paintings are further discussed on the basis of theories connecting migration with movement, both within and of the work. Chapter Four also addresses notions of materiality, agency and performativity in relation to the process of painting, based on the writing of theorists including Isabel Graw, David Joselit and Barbara Bolt.

1.7 Challenges and constraints

There are significant formal challenges in limiting the content of a painting to that of a source photograph, particularly a media photograph depicting an unfolding event. The primary motivation behind most media images is not to achieve compositional unity or be judged by aesthetic criteria. Painting from a photograph, or part of a photograph, without significantly changing the important elements of the original image, was one of the biggest difficulties I confronted. I realise that this was a self-imposed constraint but, given the project was about re-representing events already pictured, it was important to make an explicit connection between a painting and its source

photograph. Every painting, therefore, re-presented at least a section of an individual source photograph. My intention was not to compare the effectiveness of a painting against a photograph but, rather, to provide a framework in which to consider what painting can enable. It is because I did not want to encourage direct comparison between a photograph and a painting that I have not included my source images in my submission. For the same reason, I did not base any of the paintings on photographs or other images that were likely to be recognised. In recent years, several specific media images have come to signify the European and American immigration crises. I have avoided using these photographs as they operate differently from the daily, repetitive news imagery that, I argue, goes largely unexamined.

Despite setting a limit on how much I allowed myself to distort or manipulate a source image, I refer to alternative ways in which real events have been represented artistically, be that through painting, photography or film. Helen Johnson addresses concerns relating to the representation of historical issues in both her painting and writing, and her work has been useful in my research into how painting can interact with an audience. In order to avoid criticism that relates to attempts to represent, including that of didacticism, painters of real events might consider Crowther's (1993, p. 91) advice. If the work sublimates the inevitable struggle with tradition and ideology, rather than pressing it directly on us, he argues, then it has the possibility of inviting the viewer to share the artist's distinctive vision of the world. What should be of interest, Crowther (1993, p. 158) suggests, is not what the work represents but how it represents.

Another problem that I address is the degree to which a viewer needs to recognise what they see in order to respond to the actual subject matter. Crowther (1993, p. 111) reminds us that we are predisposed to regard paintings as "complexes of narrative, expressive and aesthetic signification, which set forth a particular style of viewing of the world". I was conscious of the need to present a sufficient element of narrative to enable an association with the subject matter, while still producing work of expressive and aesthetic value. The dilemma of how far to stray from an easily readable image arose throughout my practical research, and I discuss various ideas about indeterminateness, as well as the effect of reproducing an existing image.

Ultimately, I found that the issue of how readily a painting could be interpreted, in terms of its subject matter, was determined more by how the painting operated according to its environment than by what it portrayed. The context in which it is presented, therefore, is crucial to what painting can bring to a depiction of a real event.

The project has been largely focused on refugee and migration activity in and around Europe because, when I began sourcing photographs to paint from, that was the region attracting the most media attention. It was also the region where I was able to personally experience some of the impact of the massive movement of people from the Middle East in the past four years. While I have been alert to surges of refugee and migration activity in other parts of the world during the period, the paintings reflect the photographs and other images that were being published and circulated most regularly at the time. While issues relating to refugees have been at the forefront of political debate and humanitarian concern in my home country of Australia throughout the period of the project, there has been little associated media imagery to work with. Unlike in Europe, there has been no land-based movement of masses of people and, due to restrictions on media access to refugee detention centres, activity in those regions has not been widely photographed.

In Chapter Two, I discuss how an exhibit at *documenta14* in Kassel, Germany, in 2017, gave me cause to reflect on my right to exploit or appropriate the circumstances and stories of others. This concern dogged me throughout the project but, like all the difficulties I confronted, it became a way in which I could consider the question of what painting gives possibility to: it provided a framework to think about the potential for a shift in the relationship between subject and object that painting could facilitate.

1.8 To finish

I began this Introduction with a description of a scene I witnessed and photographed with my iPhone. Compared with most of the photographs of refugee events circulating at that time on social media platforms, or in the mainstream digital media that I followed daily to see where the most intense refugee-related action was occurring, my

photo of the abandoned inflatable dinghy would have made little impression. The refugee activity in that part of Greece—which only months before had been the centre of the world's attention when a photograph of a dead child on a nearby beach cut through the daily barrage of media imagery—had come to a temporary halt, a tentative political deal having been struck. But there, tied to the concrete harbour wall, were the remains of an event. This was a personal and direct experience of something that had occurred, unmediated by a photograph on a digital screen. The question was how, or if, my encounter with the sinking dinghy would have any influence on how a painting of the subject matter might operate on a viewer. My answer is that all of a painter's past experience contributes to the decisions they make in creating a work, in the same way that the whole life of a viewer can be drawn upon in the consumption of a painting. A shared part of the past experience of both painter and viewer is their exposure to media imagery.

My contribution to this field stems from my professional background in journalism and media relations, and the recognition of its role in the submitted work. Bringing my training and experience in communicating information through the media, I have considered my responses as a painter to real situations and events already reported through media channels, and I have tested how paintings based on events familiar to us through media imagery might communicate with their viewers in a different way. I have also considered how paintings of real events operate as part of the ongoing circulation of images and how they interact with the issues related to their subject matter. What my practical work has demonstrated is that through the development of pictorial devices to evoke states such as movement, potential and provisionality—states inherent to the nature of major world events—a painter engages and participates in things going on in the world in a manner unique to them. The outcome of that process—the paintings and their staging—can then provide an opportunity for viewers to contemplate their own relationship with the issues on which the work is based. Painting can invite viewers to play a part in situations and events that occur far from our everyday existence, but that are the reality of the world we live in. My project argues for a recognition of the potential for painting, and its

conditions of display, to facilitate a new opportunity for understanding and knowledge in relation to things occurring in the world.

Chapter Two: Reality and Representation

"Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality."

—Walter Benjamin (2002, p. 526), quoting Bertolt Brecht

2.1 Introduction

To base paintings on photographs, most of which are sourced from digital media platforms, required me to consider how media imagery functions and how the representation of real events through painting changed with the advent of photography. This chapter addresses why and how painters continue to represent real events that have already been captured and circulated through photography. I examine the strategies of three contemporary painters who base paintings on photographs—Marlene Dumas, Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans—and how their paintings operate to do something other than merely represent a specific event or individual. I consider the question posed by Peter Geimer, that these painters' work might be more a comment on how we consume imagery than a straightforward representation of reality, along with other theorists' views on the role of artistic representation.

The chapter addresses the degree to which a viewer requires a visual association with something already known to them in order to derive meaning from a painting. This is assessed in the context of a call by T. J. Demos (2013, p. 88) for reality to be presented through the production of an effect on the viewer, rather than as a visual statement of fact. Richard Mosse's *Incoming* (2015-16), which uses heat-sensing military technology to film real situations, is discussed as an example of how art might overcome problems of objectification and a sense of superiority, which Demos associates with conventional representation. An encounter with a hijacked artwork (discussed at 2.12) prompted me to question the ethics of my approach to the representation of the circumstances of other people, and I note Gottfried Boehm's suggestion that imprecision within a painting might help avoid fetishisation of the subject matter. Tactics to overcome some of the problems of representation are considered and, in the discussion of my painting of a fatally-wounded Syrian child, I

suggest that it is the physical and emotional engagement with the image that helps to reduce objectification or exploitation. The chapter ends with an explanation of my fixation on a pink suitcase, which began to reveal how grappling with the difficulties of adequately representing something through paint on canvas can reflect an intellectual wrestling, and a meaningful form of engagement, with the complexities of an issue like mass migration.

2.2 Through a media lens

Most of our exposure to the world's refugee crisis is through forms of media. Images of desperate people attempting to make unauthorised border crossings or being detained appear when I scan my online morning newspaper, check my Instagram feed or watch the evening television news. Even with dramatic changes to conventional reporting through the development of social media, the primary role of the media in liberal-democratic societies is to keep us informed. My early training as a newspaper reporter was straightforward: tell the reader what happened—when, where, how and to whom. The photographer who accompanied me to cover a story was expected to do the same, only through pictures rather than words—although I knew that a powerful image could make the difference between a mediocre article being run on the coveted page three or relegated to the back section. Yet, it is not only the facts of an event that we consume from media sources. The continual flow of news about ongoing issues like migration helps to determine our views about what is happening, why it is happening and what should be done about it.

Edward Saïd (1983, pp. 157-158) argues that, "The news is a euphemism for ideological images of the world that determine political reality for a vast majority of the world's population". This suggests that news images of major world events operate to reinforce views, positions and prejudices that one sector of society has about another. According to Levi Strauss (2003, p. 26), news photographs function to "encourage" feelings of "superiority" for the spectator-consumer. These ideas—that media images embed both a point of view and a sense of being deservedly protected

from difficulties faced by other people—provide a starting point to consider how painting might alter the way in which we respond to the subject matter.

In his essay, *The Photographic Message,* Barthes (1977, p. 18) considers a news photograph to be "a first-order message": it is never artistic and cannot signify more than it visually describes. He also postulates, however, that a press photograph is "connoted" in that it has been professionally mediated and is "read" in the context of what we are conditioned to see and understand from an image (p. 19). The reality of our media experience today is the "manic conformity" suggested by Crowther (1993, p. 13), whereby we are so continually bombarded with imagery that conforms to our expectations that we no longer make the effort to interrogate what we are looking at. It is within this framework of how media photographs function that I have investigated how painting can provide a more meaningful audience engagement with imagery of events of global significance.

2.3 A note on history painting

The evolution of painting as a way to record and communicate significant events, albeit from the perspective of the artist's personal circumstances or his patron's wishes, is recognised as making its largest shift, or facing its greatest crisis, with the advent of photography. Freed from its primary requirement to report and record historic deeds and events, painting could increasingly assume the role of social commentary and criticism. However, there are examples of painting attempting to be more than a historical record even before the arrival of photography. Robert Storr (2000) points to Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (Figure 1), executed two decades before the introduction of commercial photography, as one of the first great European history paintings to upset the genre's conventions and traditions. The huge painting is a close-up depiction of desperate, drowning and already dead figures on a disintegrating wooden raft in rough sea against a stormy sky. It is painted in dark, neutral hues; the only light is a sickly glow cast by an ominous sky. A few of the figures at the rear right-side of the raft gesture towards a far-off ship, with one shirtless figure held aloft and waving a garment to attract attention.

As well as making an overt political statement about the abandonment of common passengers from a sinking ship by an incompetent, aristocratic captain—information that was in the public arena—Storr (2000, p. 123) argues that the painting was contentious due to its lack of an identifiable hero or martyr, a hitherto requisite element of history painting. Instead, the work suggests the desperate plight of ordinary and anonymous people. Géricault overturns the conventional distant viewpoint by placing some figures so close to the viewer's field of vision that the head of one drowning figure disappears out of the picture's frame at the bottom right-side of the canvas. This close-up positioning and the large scale of the work invites us to identify with the life-size figures, and suggests that the fate of the unknown and insignificant is no less important than the grand themes of traditional history painting.

Figure 1: Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-19. Oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. From Wikimedia Commons.

Almost 50 years later, Édouard Manet painted three versions of *The Execution of Maximilien* (1867-68), based on another contentious event. Unlike Géricault, however, Manet was working in an era in which photography had started to take the lead role in reporting and informing.

According to Storr (2000, p. 123), Manet's paintings were "implicit critiques" of Napoleon III's rule of France. While the subject matter of the paintings refers to Goya's *The Third of May* (1808), a critique of earlier Napoleonic rule, Manet also sourced documentary photography, journalistic sketches and word-of-mouth accounts of the execution. His awareness of the new problem of re-representing an event that had already been documented is evident in his different approach to each of the three versions. Manet altered his techniques in order to portray the event and represent reality from varying visual and psychological perspectives. This reflects what Michael Fried (1965, p. 49) describes as Manet's consciousness of his own problematic relationship to reality and for whom consciousness itself was the great artistic subject.

One version, *Execution of the Emperor Maximilien* (Figure 2), is painted loosely and impressionistically; the paint itself evokes the emotion and drama of the scene but provides little contextual information. A largely featureless figure facing the viewer holds a rifle: this helps us to read the white patches of paint at the top of the image as gun smoke and the obscured figures behind him as a firing squad. The targets are vague human shapes; the blue and black hues of most of the work provide little distinction between figures and background. The bottom-left corner, painted with thick, rough and energetic brushstrokes of pale ochre, provides a stronger focal point than the event depicted. This corner section shifts between an illustration of a dynamic, illuminated space beneath the figures and a section of bright, thickly painted marks on canvas, which contrasts with the thin, dark washes of paint across the rest of the image. We feel we can reach out and touch the ochre brushstrokes; they are tangible and tactile, and they remind us that the surveyed scene is, in reality, a painted object.

The second version (Figure 3), titled *The Execution of Maximilien of Mexico,* depicts the event from the perspective of a traditional history painting; the complete event unfolds in realistic detail in the foreground against a conventional landscape background. As in all three versions, the lone officer who holds his rifle and faces the viewer is given more prominence than the martyrs being executed, but the realistic representation of a unified, daylit scene operates to suggest an unfolding narrative, rather than evoke a sensory or emotive response. The inclusion of a group of

spectators watching the event from behind a high wall reinforces the representative nature of the work: there is an event to be recorded and observed. Likewise, Manet has composed the picture so that a viewer is placed in a similar position but directly opposite the spectators. The viewpoint is high, and we sense that we, too, are at a distance and looking down at the scene, as if atop a wall situated outside of the picture's frame.

The third version (Figure 4), which comprises four painted fragments of different sizes attached to a canvas support, reflects cool, objective observation—a direct reference to Manet's source material. The figures are painted realistically and in almost the same configuration as in the second version, but the landscape background is more generic. No spectators are pictured, and the viewer is positioned closer to the action, at the same level as the firing squad. Only one martyr is shown, holding the hand of another unseen figure; he has been cut into two rectangular segments and pasted back into the image. The same technique of cutting and repasting a segment draws attention to the lone officer on the right of the main group and his part in, or detachment from, the event.

In creating three versions, Manet alludes directly to the different ways in which an event can be interpreted and responded to; he has drawn our attention to the various perspectives from which we see and think about issues and current affairs, and he has demonstrated some of those ways of seeing through his choices of composition, scale, painting technique and emphasis. These are the some of the formal devices I have explored in determining how painting could challenge a factual representation of an event.

Figure 2 (left): Édouard Manet, *Execution of the Emperor Maximilien*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 196 x 259.8 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 3 (right): Édouard Manet, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilien of Mexico,* 1867. Oil on canvas, 252 x 305 cm. Städtische Kunsthalle, Mannheim.

Figure 4: Édouard Manet, *The Execution of Maximilien,* c. 1867-68. Oil on canvas (four fragments), 193 x 284 cm. National Gallery, London.

2.4 Three painters

At the core of this project is the question of what painting can bring to subject matter already represented in media photography. Given that a photograph is much more accurate and credible as a medium for transmitting visual information, painting must offer something else to our understanding of reality. Storr (2000) argues that the genre of history painting—effectively made redundant through photography—was recuperated by Richter with his *October 18, 1977* (1988) cycle of fifteen paintings. Richter's paintings from police and newspaper photographs depict the lives, arrests and deaths of members of a German terrorist group, known as the Red Army Faction,

in what had been a highly contentious and well-publicised sequence of events eleven years earlier. Several of the paintings are close-up, life-size portraits of individuals—seated, walking, hanging dead, and prostrate on the ground. Two, named *Arrest 1* and *Arrest 2,* are so indistinct that we depend on the titles to understand the content. One painting shows a record player that was used to hide a weapon; another depicts an empty prison cell; the largest work is a close-up panorama of a funeral (Figure 25). In each of the paintings, but to varying degrees, Richter uses a soft blurring technique that suggests an out-of-focus click of a camera, and his restriction of colour to a grey-scale that reflects black and white film reinforces the sense of the images as photographs. While the blurring shields the viewer from the sharpness of photographic reality, Storr (2000, p. 140) argues that Richter has made the events "more visible", suggesting that painting has the power to communicate reality with an enhanced clarity. However, in creating the cycle, it was not Richter's intention to inform or remind us of the events, or to draw attention to their controversial circumstances. That had been done a decade earlier through the media. Richter (2009, p. 239) has spoken of his intention to provoke contradictions, and to communicate emotions such as grief and compassion, rather than represent a series of events.

When I saw firsthand the paintings that Richter based on photos of the hanged body of Gudrun Ensslin, it was not horror or distaste or anger that I felt; rather, the smooth, softly blurred painting of this awful event evoked sadness and a distress at my inability to make sense of such things. The careful blurring and evenly-applied paint show that Richter worked with deep care and consideration. There is no suggestion of violence and no emotional outbursts in his use of paint; the graphic and violent nature of Ensslin's actions and her death is sublimated to an awareness of the strange effect of Richter's painting. Richter's blurring technique suggests the passage of time, as does the combination of three images of Ensslin in *Confrontation 1, 2* and *3* (Figures 5, 6 and 7) as she walks by, in the first painting glancing towards the viewer, in the second looking beyond them, and in the third looking down but facing the viewer side-on. The blurring challenges the absolute immediacy of a camera's shutter; there might only be seconds implied between the capture of her image in paint and the moment she was photographed, but the technique draws attention to the fixedness of a photo

compared with the actual situation as Ensslin moved towards her death. Storr (2000, pp. 103-104) argues that *October 18, 1977* points to the contradiction between painting's slowness—it takes time to create—and photography's speed, and between the viewer's ability to spend time with the paintings and the reality of Ensslin's circumstances, for which time no longer exists. This notion of time is a critical element in painting's capacity to engage its audience and is discussed further in Chapter Four.

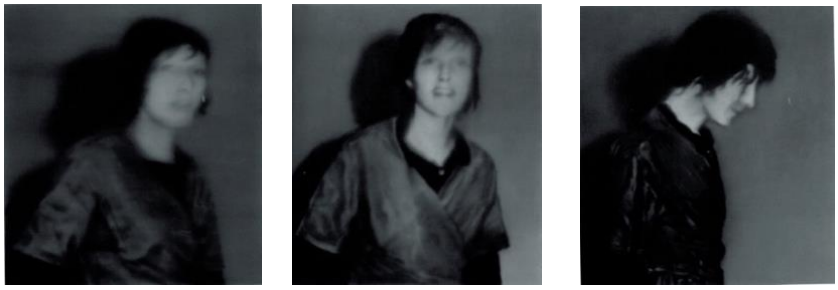


Figure 5 (left), 6 (centre) and 7 (right): Gerhard Richter, *Confrontation 1, Confrontation 2* and *Confrontation 3*, 1988. Oil on canvas. 112 x 102 cm each. From Storr 2000, ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

Luc Tuymans (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 16) talks about working from "imagery that has already been represented in the culture", as if his motivation is not to report or even comment on an event, but rather to play with how the effect or interpretation of an image might alter, depending on how, where and when it is viewed. *The Arena I-VI* (2014) cycle of paintings was created for a major solo exhibition in Qatar. Tuymans based the paintings on stills from a film that he made from his 1978 mixed-media work, *Arena,* which drew from 1940s photographs of people fleeing on boats from Europe. The paintings (Figures 8 and 9), which are executed in Tuymans' characteristic neutral, pale and limited palette, show undefined figures in indeterminate space, and seem to depict an event involving the grouping and organising of people. The scant, faded visual information evokes a strong sense of the paintings having been sourced from old and overused film footage or arbitrary photographs. The pictured scene repeats across the cycle but is seen from different positions. The paintings are not offered as representations of an event that occurred but, rather, as an exercise in re-contextualisation, within which the actual subject matter is rendered unimportant. Tuymans (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 18) is concerned more with universal themes—he

mentions the theme of cruelty in relation to the *Arena* paintings—than with specific events. This is reinforced through his use of light and dark, which makes direct reference to paintings by Goya. In doing so, Tuymans suggests a continuum of painterly intent to grapple with themes common to all humanity.

Figure 8 (left): Luc Tuymans, *The Arena I,* 2014. Oil on canvas, 176.3 x 252 cm. Courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans.

Figure 9 (right): Luc Tuymans, *The Arena II,* 2014. Oil on canvas, 182.2 x 253 cm. Courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans.

According to Nicholas Cullinan (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 42), Tuymans' response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States was *Still Life* (2002), an enormous painting of an otherwise almost conventional still-life composition of glass jug, fruit, plates and napkin placed at the centre of a large area of blue-tinged white background. There is nothing in this work to suggest a traumatic event. If Tuymans is responding to the 9/11 attacks, as Cullinan argues, he does so with an image that transcends the events and everything they represent. *Still Life* (Figure 10) can be read as the ultimate non-reporting of an event. Its commentary is about defiance. Tuymans alludes to the timelessness of traditional still-life painting but dramatises his subject through scale. The work suggests that, despite everything that has occurred, our status as civilised human beings and our values remain intact; it proclaims that we will not be defined by these events. Tuymans demonstrates that a visual reference to traditional representation can operate as a comment on the nature of humanity.

Figure 10: Luc Tuymans, *Still Life,* 2002. Oil on canvas, 347 x 500 cm. Courtesy of Studio Luc Tuymans.

While *Still Life* reflects on the relationship between artistic convention and contemporary reality, Tuymans' *The Secretary of State* (2005) points to the ubiquity and conformity of media imagery. The painting depicts a close-up, not-quite-full head-shot of Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State under George W. Bush's administration. We recognise Rice from the myriad television and newspaper images that record her defence of her government's stance on an issue that might have been of significance or interest to us, but we do not know from the painting what that issue was. Most of us would never have seen or heard her in any way other than through the media. That Rice's face is so instantly recognisable reflects the quantity of media imagery we consume. Our sense of the image having been sourced from the media—Tuymans' pale, washed-out hues evoke the reflective glare of a television screen—reinforces the uniform and predictable way in which such imagery is presented. Referencing Jean Baudrillard's premise that we recognise reality in terms of how well it matches accepted operational structures such as media discourse, Crowther (1993, pp. 12-13) argues that our contemporary experience of reality is one of a rapid and overwhelming flow of media imagery. *The Secretary of State* (Figure 11) reinforces this notion that reality is not the events or issues themselves; rather, our reality is constructed from media images that serve to reinforce what we already know or think

we know. Painting from a media image, therefore, can challenge us to question the way in which we determine our view of reality. By making an explicit reference to its media source, a painting can encourage the viewer to consider how they receive and process information and knowledge about world affairs.

Figure 11: Luc Tuymans, *The Secretary of State*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 61.5 cm. Photo by Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York, London.

While both Richter and Tuymans make explicit reference to photography and our understanding of events through media imagery, Marlene Dumas' paintings address real, familiar, yet often unspecific events that appear to be drawn from newspaper images but are not a commentary on them. In *Osama* (2010), the face of the world's best-known terrorist is easily identifiable, but this is no conventional portrait. Bin Laden's features (Figure 12) are sketched with thin washes of paint, the white of the underlying canvas shows through his sickly yellow forehead and artificial green-blue cheeks. His wide open, dark eyes gaze out towards the viewer but are fixed on something beyond them. The garish colours of his face speak of death, or at least not the warmth of life, and the black surround speaks of nothingness. The strange effect of the paint itself, and the artist's decision to paint such a loaded image, tells us we are not looking at a conventional representation of an individual but, rather, at the presentation of an unanswerable question.

Figure 12: Marlene Dumas, *Osama,* 2010. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Photo by Peter Cox, Eindhoven. Courtesy of Archive Studio Dumas.

In *The Mother* (2009), we see a figure draped in a black veil and crouched beside rows of rectangular holes (Figure 13). Facing her, above one of the holes, is a framed image of the face of a young man. Unlike with *Osama,* we cannot identify figures, yet we know intuitively what we are looking at: a grieving mother at a gravesite of young men who have died in the service of their or someone else's ideology. The overly-large painting is not a representation of a particular event, but conjures myriad terrorism-related images from our television screens and newsfeeds. We think that we have seen this image, that we know the event it refers to, and have heard the commentary surrounding it. Dumas' limited palette of flat blacks against light washes and rough scrapes of cold, pale greens and blues reflect the colourless, featureless world we see in media images of violence and death in the Middle East. The lack of detail and the hurried, spartan application of paint suggest a lack of significance that contrasts with the grieving figure at the centre of the work. It is as if Dumas did not have time or materials to spare in getting the image down. The work seems driven by a necessity and urgency to capture the moment, yet it is a deeply compelling image precisely because its ordinariness and its lack of finesse asks us to consider the artist's motivation. We are prompted to question the meaning and point of a painting—a question we do not ask of the ubiquitous media images of grieving families in contested regions of the world.

Like Richter's *October 18, 1977*, Dumas' *The Mother* does not provide information about a specific event but engenders conflicting emotions—empathy,

grief, anger and an overwhelming sense of waste. The processes used by each artist, however, differ. Richter's explicit technical prowess and the carefulness with which he renders his images mirror the commitment of his protagonists, whereas Dumas' fast, unrefined brushstrokes of thin paint emphasise waste and meaninglessness.

Figure 13: Marlene Dumas, *The Mother,* 2009. Oil on canvas, 180 x 300 cm. Private collection. Photo by Peter Cox, Eindhoven. Courtesy of Archive Studio Dumas.

The work of the three artists—Dumas, Richter and Tuymans—refers to the way in which we experience world events in which we are not participants, but are aware of, primarily through the media. The source images for the paintings I have discussed are mostly media or other photographs, or, as with Tuymans' *Still Life,* explicitly not from the media. Each of the paintings sets up challenges about how we read images; each asks us to review our understanding of the events they refer to in greater depth than we do when consuming media images. All of them refer more to universal and timeless human themes than to the events on which they are based.

Through my studio work I have addressed ideas that relate to how we experience and comprehend what is going on in the world. The submitted paintings draw attention to the limitations of media imagery when it comes to grasping the complexity of issues like mass migration; they also offer an opportunity for renewed consideration of our relationship to the conflicted and traumatic circumstances of others. They do this through formal strategies that reflect concerns about the

distancing effect of images, and the context within and perspective from which we view world events. These are addressed in the next chapter.

2.5 Representing reality now—some theory

Fried (1965, p. 5) argues that the history of painting from Manet onwards "may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality—or of reality from the power of painting to represent it". A "preoccupation with problems intrinsic to painting itself" began to take precedence over painting's role in representing reality. The fact that artists continue to paint images that are obviously and deliberately based on photographs of real events, rather than on the events themselves, has led to a concept of the reflexivity of contemporary painting (Graw, Birnbaum & Hirsch 2012)—a notion that the painting of reality has little to do with the subject matter being represented but is primarily a comment on painting's limitations and the process of painting itself. The painting of real things has become a comment on painting's ability, or lack thereof, to portray reality.

Another argument, directed more specifically at painting that references photographic sources, is that the work is a commentary on the nature of media imagery and how we consume it. Geimer (Graw, Birnbaum & Hirsch 2012, p. 18) describes the painting of real events as "photography's comeback as painting", which denies photography's "right to an immediate access to history". This can be interpreted as painting making a direct challenge to the acceptance of photographs as the best way to understand something that happened somewhere. Painting, Geimer suggests, provides us with additional resources to comprehend reality. Rather than "a stubborn persistence of repeated forms of representation", he argues that Richter's paintings and those of his younger contemporary, Tuymans, are "an expression of critical behaviour" (p. 19); they are a commentary on how we see and interpret a world that, for the most part, is presented to us through the media.

The complexity of the relationship and interaction between photography and painting is central to an investigation into the nature of representing reality in art because there is always the question of why a painter feels compelled to represent

what has already been presented in a photograph. For David Green, Richter's work is more than just a critical response to the relationship between the two mediums. Green (2000, p. 47) refers to Walter Benjamin's call for a practice that Green states "would deny the possibility of the past speaking directly to us, of proclaiming itself as the irrefutable truth". Green suggests that Benjamin's plea was for artists to continue to represent reality but do so in a way that gives rise to alternative interpretations and ongoing possibilities.

It is within this framework that I have considered how to approach the painting of images sourced directly from photographs. Dumas, Richter and Tuymans use different painterly techniques and strategies to suggest that an event, issue or situation might not be as clear as it appears in a photographic image. In both my studio practice and in exhibiting my work throughout this project, the strategies I experimented with to avoid the paintings being read as statements of fact evolved over time. The process began with the selection of photographs from which to paint, and a recognition that the source image needed to be translatable in a way that allowed the paintings to do more than provide visual information about a specific event.

2.6 Selecting and transcribing the image

The photographs I selected to paint from, other than the few that I took myself, were sourced from the internet. I came across most of them in my regular reading of daily online newspapers; others I actively searched for. I looked at hundreds of photographs, many of which depicted the ubiquitous scene of groups of people on the move or confronting barriers to their movement. Those I selected appealed to me for different reasons; usually there was something—an object or a figure—that stopped me glancing over the photo and drew me in. That thing was not necessarily the focus of the photograph, but it became the focus for me. Barthes' concept of the *punctum* as an explanation for my attraction to particular photographs is relevant in this project. Barthes (2000, p. 27) suggests that the *punctum* of a photograph has an almost physical impact, creating a disturbance or wound in the viewer.

As I searched through my daily digital newspapers, I found myself waiting to be physically grasped by a photograph, or by part of one. This is not how media photography is usually consumed; the intent of most news photography is to inform viewers about an event rather than have them dwell on a particular element. My selection of photographs from which to paint, therefore, was highly personal, often occurring in the way Barthes suggests a photograph can operate on an individual. I selected media images that said something about the nature of migration in our world today, or that reflected the broader issues being discussed at the time. In some cases, the element of the photograph that attracted me seemed symbolic of a situation.

Once selected, I cropped the images according to various criteria, some of which were based in theories that I discuss in the next chapter, such as the distancing effect of photographs. One consideration was that newspaper photographs tend to be presented in a landscape format, as is the imagery we view on a television screen. To emphasise the shift from photographic to painted imagery, I cropped most of the source images to square or portrait format. This changed the way the images are read; without the wide landscape format, the viewer is no longer looking, spectator-like, at a scene presented from afar. They are also alerted to a shift in how they are being asked to interpret these types of images: the viewer's conditioning in relation to how they view particular types of images is challenged.

With many of the source images, I zoomed in on the element within the photo that had initially attracted my attention, so that, unlike in the original, it became the focus of a painting. The effect of this tactic was to alter the significance of the subject matter, with the image losing its broader context and narrative. Sometimes, what was left made little sense.

In order to make it clear that the painted images were transcribed from photographs—that they had not been reconstructed in my imagination but reflected an actual event as evidenced by a photograph—I needed to ensure the positioning of the image's various elements was broadly accurate: the painted figures and objects, and their placement in space relative to each other, had to be credible. For that, I used a grid system. This allowed me to paint outlines of the main shapes in the same position as they were in the original A3 paper print-outs of the photographic images.

I describe this part of my process because, as the project progressed, and I became increasingly frustrated by the literal nature of my painting, I began to think about my desire for control over the structure of the image as a metaphor for the Western world's attempts to manage the refugee situation. I recognised how easily I would default to a well-developed requirement for order, systems and processes, and how hard it was to submit to the demands of the painting—to engage with the materiality and formal characteristics of paint. I felt I was demonstrating the sense of dominance and superiority identified by Saïd and Levi Strauss in relation to media imagery. To really engage with the painting process, I had to relax my need for control.

Saïd and Levi Strauss share a view of news photography as a means of reinforcing ideological positions, as well as reflecting a sense of superiority by one section of society over another. Specifically addressing the representation of migration, Demos (2013, p. 17) discusses work in which "objectifying portrayals" give way to aesthetic strategies that address "the deeply complex, even contradictory experiences of displacement". Demos raises the ethical problem of attempting to represent the circumstances of other people, which risks objectification of those people. In the case of painting, with its loaded historical associations and conventions of heroes and martyrs, there is also a risk of romanticising the plight of refugees. To avoid these problems, as well as the problem he identifies as the "stultifying" representation of reality when it is nothing more than a reproduction, Demos (p. 62) asks "what would it mean to treat the real as an effect to be produced, rather than a fact to be understood?". This concept of producing an effect rather than simply reproducing a picture of an event underpinned my studio research and provided a guide to evaluate the effectiveness of the work in engaging its audience.

2.7 Coming in

For almost an hour, watching Richard Mosse's three-screen video installation *Incoming*—commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria (in conjunction with London's Barbican Art Gallery) for its inaugural *Triennial* exhibition—I sat in a comfortable bean-bag in a blackened room transfixed by slow moving, black and white

imagery and a soundscape that seemed to pulse through my body. I recognise situations: burning tents in what I understand to be a refugee camp; black-skinned men crowded like cattle in the tray of a swaying truck driving over sand-dunes; a resuscitation attempt by people clothed in protective suits; missiles being loaded onto a war-plane and the firing-up of engines; people being dragged out of sinking boats; and objects passed up and down the sides of ships.

I knew I was watching and hearing the landscape of war, passage, desperation and endless, uneventful waiting, yet I could not identify any particular event or be sure of the place where, or time that, they occurred, as there is no text or voice-over to contextualise the footage. My experience was not one of being informed about a series of incidents, nor did it require me to do or think anything, as the work contains no ideological overtone or position. It was an overwhelmingly sensory experience from which it was almost impossible to look away. Shirley Apthorp (2017, p. 12) describes *Incoming* as "a punch to the solar plexus, breathtaking in the most literal sense. It is visceral, intimate, shocking and distressingly beautiful. There are moments that make you cry out loud; indifference is impossible".

Mosse uses the power of the image, as well as sound, to create the effect described by Apthorp. Filmed using military thermal imaging technology, the strange whiteness of his subjects' hair, of lifeless bodies against the dark tones of moving limbs and faces, the greys of clothing and the black of fire, at times seem painterly. While we recognise figures, scenes, vehicles, and vast refugee camps, there is an aesthetic and slightly abstracted quality to the slow-moving images. Mosse (Apthorp 2017, p. 12) acknowledges that he uses beauty as "a powerful tool of communication". That he goes to significant effort to capture images of refugee camps, which the media are prohibited from accessing, suggests that Mosse wants to draw our attention to situations of which we have little visual awareness; as such, he is performing the role of a traditional documentary photographer. Yet it is through the formal qualities of the imagery and the nature of his mediation that he engages his viewer, rather than through an attempt to tell a story or represent a sequence of events.

Figure 14: Richard Mosse, *Incoming* (still image), 2015-16. Three-channel black and white high definition video, surround sound, 52 min 10 sec (looped). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Time shifts gear as I watch a strikingly tall man lay down his prayer mat in what appears to be the grounds of a detention site and, in the slow-motion filming that Mosse employs, bend repeatedly toward the ground, oblivious to the massive truck behind him or various people crossing his path. His face and figure, involved in a deeply personal and focused rite of belief and with no apparent consciousness of his surroundings, are mesmerizing. I follow, intently, his every physical expression.

2.8 How far to abstraction?

Demos (2013, p. 88) calls for an "affective image" that "overtakes representational significance". For painting, this could be interpreted as requiring a shift away from figurative or traditionally representative work towards an abstract style that relies on the formal characteristics of paint—colour, shape, line and texture—to affect the viewer on a "sensible" level at least as much as through intelligibility (p. 62). A problem with relying exclusively on formal strategies is that, while they might be affective, the viewer, in the absence of sufficient representational significance, is unlikely to make connections to, or associations with, the subject matter. The viewer might find themselves affected but in a vacuum of relevant meaning.

Richter's *Birkenau* (2014) set of four canvases provides a case study in which an attempt to base paintings on photographs of real events resulted in purely abstracted work. The paintings respond to four photographs taken hastily and covertly before

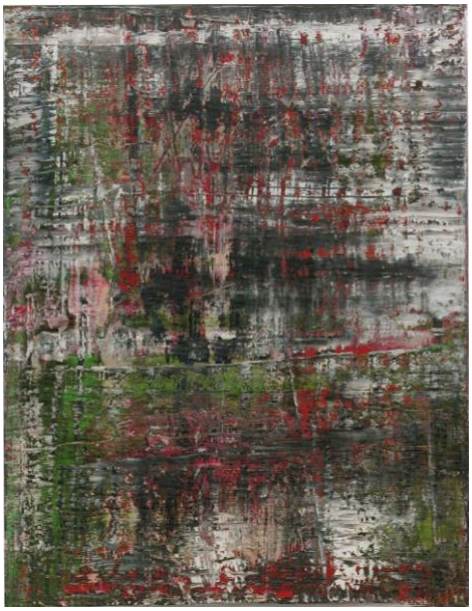
being smuggled out of the Birkenau extermination camp, which in 1944 was part of the Auschwitz complex in Nazi-occupied Poland. For Richter, as a well-established German artist, the Holocaust is a subject that cannot be ignored, but it poses serious problems in relation to how it could or should be visually represented. Working from the Birkenau photographs, Richter prepared four large vertical canvases—a format more closely associated with portraiture than narrative—then mapped the images onto the canvas in graphite. As Geraldine Kirrihi Barlow (2017, p. 56) explains, Richter, importantly, did not proceed with his intended direct figurative representation. The resulting works (Figures 15 and 16) were made with a squeegee that dragged layers of grey, white, magenta and green across the canvas surface, revealing glimpses of a fleshy nude coloured paint. The title, *Birkenau,* asks us to consider the paintings in the context of what we know about the events that occurred there. Barlow acknowledges that there cannot be a single perspective on what happened, but that does not mean we should avoid trying to understand:

> The paintings themselves convey this difficult process through their layering and their signs of an interwoven tension between revealing and concealing: wounds, scars, trenches and pits. The past is scratched open. Skins are overlaid. It is as if we are struggling with a process of endless repetition and return—an unnatural green, clouds of acrid stomach-churning grey, a fall of whitened particles over the landscape. We cycle between the abstract and a more visceral representation (Barlow 2017, p. 57).

In a panel discussion at a symposium associated with the opening weekend of a major Richter exhibition at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), Stefan Gronert (2017) suggested that the work fails in its intent to represent something real because it does not give him "visibility" to the issue. He contrasted his ambivalent response to *Birkenau* with his intense response to Richter's *October* cycle: Gronert had no direct experience of the Holocaust but, as a German teenager in the 1970s, had grown up in an atmosphere of terrorism. Gronert's comments reinforced my concern that, in order for viewers of my paintings to respond to the work, they needed to recognise

something that at least suggests a connection to migration and refugee issues. Richter's *Birkenau* is only able to operate as a "visceral representation" (Barlow 2017, p. 57) if a viewer knows something of the background to the work, the significance of the title, Richter's connection with the historical events, and his concern with the life of the image and the relationship between photography and painting. Gronert's comments suggest a viewer also requires a personal connection to the events. If we encountered *Birkenau* on a gallery wall without any of this contextualising information or background, it is unlikely that we would respond in the manner Barlow describes.

As Gronert implied during the symposium discussion, a viewer looks for an association with an image; they see in an image what they are already familiar with. In my paintings, a viewer is likely to recognise elements of images that they have seen in media coverage of refugee-related events, even if they are not consciously aware of the specific images I have used. The paintings provide sufficient information for a viewer to make associations with what they know about the issues but not so much that they lose interest in engaging further with what they see or think they are looking at.



Figures 15 (left) and 16 (right): Gerhard Richter, *Birkenau* (two of four panels) 2014. Oil on canvas, 260 x 200 cm each. Permanent loans from a private collection. Gerhard Richter Archive, Dresden, Germany. ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

I wonder, however, if *Birkenau* does succeed in doing what Henri Bergson (1946, p. 159) outlines as the second of two ways of knowing something. “The first implies going all around it, the second entering into it. The first depends on the viewpoint chosen and the symbols employed, (while) the second is taken from no viewpoint and rests on no symbols”. *Birkenau* takes neither a literal viewing position, nor a viewpoint in the sense of an opinion about what occurred. The only symbolism is the use of discomforting colour and the visceral application of paint. Richter was a child living in Germany during the Holocaust and members of his family were both participants in and victims of the Nazi regime (Hawker 2017, p. 38). *Birkenau* is Richter’s response to something in his personal experience; he had entered into it, not physically but psychologically. In basing my paintings on photographs, I continued to question what degree of personal experience of an issue an artist requires to convincingly set up a meaningful experience for an audience.

2.9 Becoming the story

Before setting off on a day’s bicycle ride that would take us through the WW2-renowned Brenner Pass and into Austria from Italy, our Italian guides suggested we bring our passports. They had seen news reports warning of an Austrian military presence at the border. We were told that the authorities were expecting a surge of refugees making their way from southern Italy and would be checking passports. The military presence did not eventuate, however. The only indication that we were cycling across the border was a white chalk line that our guides had marked on the road. They had also written the name of each country on either side. That evening over dinner, one of our guides replayed for me a news report from an Italian television station. The reporter claimed that the Austrian Prime Minister had been lying when he made assurances at a press conference earlier in the day that his government never intended to ramp up border security. Her evidence lay in the filmed image of our guides’ chalk marks, a hastily drawn line that she interpreted as a warning to refugees from the Austrian authorities not to cross the border. Inadvertently, we had become caught up in the story—a story in which the representation of events was inaccurate. A few days

later, we cycled across five borders in a single day, weaving in and out of Austria, Germany and Switzerland. We knew this thanks to the chalk marks made by our guides. For us, the borders were nothing more than a curiosity.

2.10 Painting's communicative power

In addition to its affective capabilities, painting has the ability to trigger responses based on its historic associations and conventions. Mexico City-based artist Francis Alÿs (Medina, Ferguson & Fisher 2007, p. 26) says that he uses the seductive capacity of painting to communicate more complex realities. This implies that viewers are more easily engaged by painting than by the artistic interventions and performances that are the predominant element of Alÿs's work; we are seduced by painting in part because we are accustomed to the way painting operates, and has operated throughout centuries, as a privileged art form. While Alÿs claims to use our familiarity with the conventions of painting to attract us, he deliberately disrupts our expectations of what a painting is or should be, and of the artist's role in creating an image.

In *New York Triptych* (1995-96), only the small canvas was painted by Alÿs; the two larger canvases were executed by Mexican sign painters in their flatly figurative, simple manner (Figure 17). Cuauhtémoc Medina (2007, p. 89) argues that, while Alÿs uses photographs to document his actions, interventions and constructions, he uses painting to widen the circulation of the imagery and to "re-elaborate" the original work. This suggests that Alÿs regards painting as a medium that has an enhanced power to communicate due to its conventions and associations, regardless of whether the work adheres to those conventions. While Alÿs exploits the ability of painting to attract us simply because it is a painting, and we are conditioned to enjoy painting, his tactics of repetition and reproduction challenge the conventional understanding of what painting should be. We may be taken in by colourful figurative paintings on a wall, but our ability to simply enjoy them as conventional pictures is compromised by questions raised through the work's execution and display so that, once seduced, we are then encouraged to engage more deeply.

Alÿs's paintings are not intended to affect, as urged by Demos, in order to avoid an information-driven reproduction of reality. Rather, Alÿs uses repetition and copying to reinforce the role of images in communicating and reflecting on reality. Marcus Boon (2010, p. 110) argues that processes involving copying are "a crucial factor in our ability to make sense of ourselves and the world". His concept of copying as "a particular kind of transformation" is relevant to painting based on photographs; according to Boon, the process of painting from a source image—of copying a photograph—can imbue the work and its subject matter with greater significance than the original representation of an event.

Figure 17: Francis Alÿs, *New York Triptych*, 1995-96. Oil on canvas, enamel on metal series consisting of one painting by Alÿs (left) and sign paintings by Enrique Huerta (centre) and Emilio Rivera (right). Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Courtesy of Gallerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

2.11 Portrait of a child

At the start of this project I painted two small portraits—realistic copies of online news images. One was of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. At the time, Merkel represented the most pro-refugee and open-border political position in Europe. The other was of Donald Trump, who was then taunting the world with the prospect of a run for the US presidency and, as part of his nascent campaign, mooting the idea of a wall to end the flow of illegal immigrants from Central America. I was in the process of

finishing these two paintings when I read an online New York Times article about a bombing in Syria that had killed dozens of civilians, including children. These were children whose parents were having to decide, on a day-by-day basis, whether to remain in their war-torn cities or risk leaving to make a perilous journey to seek asylum somewhere safer. Embedded in the article was a video clip sourced from a social media platform. The quality of the clip was poor but there was no doubt what I was watching. A man with a hand-held camera was circling the dead bodies of his three young daughters, who had been shrouded in white and laid together.

My reaction to the clip was not only a sense of waste of three innocent young lives, but also shock that a father would respond to the deaths of his children by posting a video of them on social media. Then I realised that this might have been the most significant thing he could do; in quite a clinical, unemotional manner, he had shown us the reality of his situation, and because we knew that the video had been taken by him and was not mediated by a third party (other than having its circulation massively increased by the New York Times), it had the power of personal involvement—of being a participant in the event.

I decided to paint a third portrait (Figure 18) as part of what could be a single work representing three perspectives on a far-reaching issue. However, as I worked through the video clip, pausing at selected points, reformatting into digital stills and then cropping and rotating, I felt I was intruding on the father's grief. While I had no qualms or emotional response to painting images of political figures, I wondered if I could be accused of exploiting the father's story by painting from his video, even when he had sought a response from the outside world by posting it. Yet, once I had decided on a composition—a close-up portrait of one of the girl's faces, framed by a white veil, eyes closed and a scar on her cheek the only sign that she had encountered violence—and began to paint, my feelings changed. The process of painting took over from any intellectual consideration of her circumstances. I thought of Richter's (2009, p. 229) comments on painting his *October 18, 1977* cycle, of the source photographs being "unendurable" and of his need to "reconstruct" events, to physically grapple with the events by painting. Standing in front of the small, rough linen support and working paint into the textured surface to construct the life-size face of a dead child, focusing

on her image, I felt a raft of emotions; I felt the need to do her justice through paint. It was at this point in the research that I began to develop an understanding that the process of painting itself can engender in the artist a personal and individual responsibility towards the subjects and circumstances depicted. As I discuss in the following chapters, this engagement between artist and subject matter then relies on the formal qualities of the painting to include the viewer in an equally meaningful experience.

I have not exhibited the work as initially planned, with the three images side by side. The images of the two politicians are too obvious. I had hoped they might symbolise the tension and antagonism associated with issues related to migration but, as images of politicians about whom we have preconceived views, they read too literally. The image of the dead child, however, affects us at a deeper level. Relying on painterly convention, it presents what looks like a traditional religious figure with a serene expression and Madonna-like veil. Storr (2000, p. 103) claims that "photography does not allow us to contemplate death". To do that requires the element of time passing, and painting, with "time indelibly marked in its skin—restores duration to images of death". The picture of a dead child represents an horrific occurrence, yet it does not repulse; the avoidance of sharp edges or harsh colour and the soft brushstrokes invite contemplation; it does not require the viewer to act, but it does ask them to acknowledge the existence of this child and, for a moment or two, be with her.

I was reminded of a comment by the American writer Richard Ford in an interview about a book about his quite ordinary parents—a dramatic deviation from his usual fictional work. Ford (Romei 2017, p. 17) describes the work as an attempt to "testify to the actuality of these people". "You basically surrender them into the cavalcade of humanity which you accept", he said. In painting someone real, in the process of working paint onto the support to form an image of that person, an artist acknowledges the reality, the actuality and the existence of another human being.

Figure 18: *Untitled,* 2016. Oil on linen, 36 x 30 cm.

2.12 The right to represent

As part of Kassel's *documenta14* art show throughout the 2017 European summer, there was an artwork by Spanish-born artist Roger Bernat, titled *The Place of the Thing.* The central object of the work was a polystyrene and fibreglass replica of Athens' oath stone—the enormous stone in the city's ancient Agora on which magistrates took their oath of office—which was supposed to be making its way from Athens to Kassel. The photo-documented journey was intended to reflect the journey being made by tens of thousands of refugees from Greece to northern Europe. The *Thing*, however, never made it to Kassel, having been stolen by an LGBTQI refugee rights group whose members posed as legitimate participants in the object's journey, before announcing that the object had been deliberately 'disappeared'. The act, they argued, rendered the *Thing* invisible, and its circumstances potentially as dire as the refugees who, they claimed, were being fetishised through an elite and expensive art event. As I looked at the incomplete documentation of the *Thing*'s journey in the Neue Neue Galerie in Kassel, I wondered if, through the paintings, I could be accused of fetishising refugees: of exploiting or romanticising their circumstances for the sake of art that I hoped would one day be hanging on the walls of an exhibition space and admired by a wine-sipping, canape-nibbling audience.

In conversation with Tuymans, Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, p. 106) questions whether a painter wanting to avoid fetishism can do so through imprecision. Imprecision, he claims, "automatically guarantees that the conditions of representation remain part of the representation of the object". I take this to mean that, through imprecise rendering of an object, a painting asks the viewer to consider the circumstances of the object and the reason for its representation in a painting, rather than simply accepting the object as a fact. Boehm (2018, p. 108) suggests that creativity is connected with "not knowing". Uncertainty on the part of the artist—a genuine lack of knowledge and determination about how a painting might develop—can help overcome preconceived and objectifying views on the circumstances of the subject. A lack of both certainty and precision in the painting process mirrors the ways in which we need to approach an understanding of others' situations, if we are to remain open to alternative perspectives. Ultimately, I determined that it was the way in which the artist engaged with the issues through the work—the performativity of painting, which I discuss in Chapter Four—that can provide a path through the various ethical dilemmas.

2.13 A pink suitcase

In October 2016, the French authorities began dismantling a refugee camp known as the *Calais Jungle* and evicting around 10,000 inhabitants who were hopeful of ultimate passage to the United Kingdom. During the ten days or so of this event, I sifted through dozens of digital images of queueing masses, bulldozed tents and makeshift huts, burning vehicles and night-time mayhem, to find something that I could paint. I felt a strong need to note the enormity of this particular situation within the ongoing drama of the European refugee crisis. A small, vividly pink suitcase, standing in a line of more easily overlooked luggage, attracted me. The photograph was on Australia's Channel Nine television website, with a caption explaining that hundreds of people were queueing for buses out of the Calais camp. In the line of oversized sport-bags and canvas sacks that belonged to the beanie-wearing young men who dominated the pictures I was viewing, the pink suitcase seemed all wrong, as if a girl who enjoyed

pretty clothes and taking beach holidays, and who liked the colour pink, had got caught up in something outside her normal existence.

I painted *All That I Have* (2017) in response to the sense of poignancy I felt looking at the pink suitcase in the photograph (Figure 19). The suitcase takes up most of the canvas and is close to life-size. It is realistically portrayed but without fine detail; the layered paint reflects my repeated return to the work and an elaboration of the image. The pink suitcase sits against a dark green background that suggests an outdoor setting and there is a hint of other bags on either side of it. You might think that you could pick it up and take it away. The painting sat in my studio for some months. The image continued to trouble me. I decided to paint it again, quickly, in the space of a few hours. Then I painted a few more versions, differently, some of them requiring me to return to them and add more, and some of them complete within a day or two (Figures 20, 21, 22 and 23). Some of them show little more than a broken outline or thinly applied brushstrokes that form a loose impression of a bag, emphasising the provisional nature of its owner's circumstances. In their various stages of completeness, they mirror the impossibility of representing those circumstances. In finding alternative ways to paint the image, in testing various formal techniques to see if the way I use paint influences the way the image is read, I reflected on Boon's (2010, p. 983) argument that "difference manifests itself in repetition and marks a transformation that happens within repetition". It was the differences between each version of the pink bag that became the content of the work; the various versions point to the infinite ways in which something can be represented and interpreted, and to the endless possibilities that the work can suggest. Variation through repetition emphasises the human ability to visualise alternative outcomes and reinforces the impossibility of declaring absolute an understanding of anything.

Figures 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23: *All That I Have*, 2017-19. Oil on canvas, various dimensions.

2.14 To conclude

This chapter has addressed the rationale of artists who continue to represent real things going on in the world, and some of the ways in which they do so. I have identified problems that arise from artistic attempts at representation, such as objectification and the mere restatement of visual information, and I have considered suggestions by various theorists to help overcome them. Many of the strategies used by the artists discussed—shifting and distorting the viewer's sightline, changing scale, obscuring detail, using unnatural colour and making explicit reference to media imagery and technology—have helped further my investigation into how painting can engage both artist and viewer in a consideration of how we view world events, and of our relationship with the circumstances of others.

Chapter Three: Distance, Perspective and Context

"All seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing."

—Friedrich Nietzsche (1989, p. 255)

3.1 Introduction

As well as operating to reinforce feelings of superiority over people in other parts of the world, Levi Strauss (2003, p. 26) argues that news images highlight the distance, both literal and psychological, between far-off events and our everyday lives. Despite providing evidence that something has happened, photographs of real events, he argues, have the effect of separating us from real experiences. Most news photography, Levi Strauss posits, fails to generate an active response: "The action has already been taken, and we are not implicated. Our complicity is concealed intact" (p. 81).

Building on the theories of Rancière, Crowther and Heidegger, this chapter addresses how painting can overcome the distancing effect of media reports, and how it might help to close the gap between the viewer and situations playing out around the world—events we see in our news-feeds but with which we have little personal engagement. The themes of distance, perspective and context relate both to the artist's experience and setting up an audience experience; they are core concepts in considering how we interpret and derive meaning from the painting of real events.

In this chapter, I discuss how the work of Richter and Tuymans, considered in Chapter Two in relation to its representative function, also addresses the distancing effect of media imagery. Referring to another of Tuymans' paintings, I discuss how context can change the reading of a painting to enable new interpretations, and describe how I have applied this concept to my work. The response of two artists, Alfredo Jaar and Ben Quilty, to their personal interactions with people affected by traumatic events is considered in relation to my own experiences in the wake of refugee activity and how that has informed my studio research. I discuss the role of perspective in how we experience things going on in the world, and how painting can

draw attention to the ways in which we acquire knowledge and develop views from both direct and mediated experiences.

3.2 The space between us

Despite extensive written and photographic news coverage of the Rwandan genocide of the mid-1990s, it seemed to Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar that the Western world had failed to comprehend or respond to the situation (Levi Strauss 2003). This lack of engagement compelled Jaar to create and exhibit a nuanced and potent visual response to the atrocities. *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996) comprises hundreds of illuminated photographic slides depicting the eyes of a woman affected by the genocide (Figure 24). In picturing only her eyes, it draws us into a close encounter with the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a woman who had witnessed the shooting murder of her husband and child.

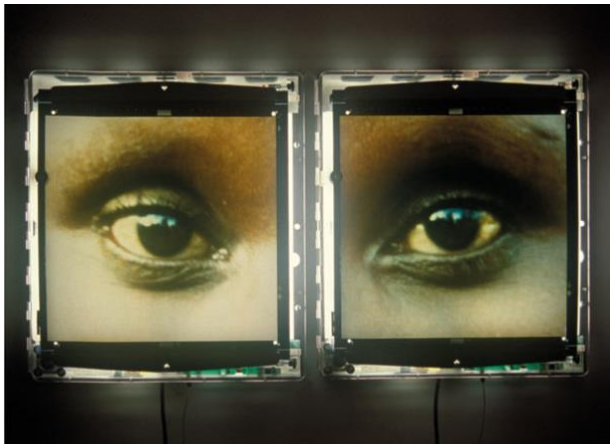


Figure 24: Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996. Photographic transparency. From I.B.Tauris publishers.

Jaar laments the disjuncture between experience and what can be recorded photographically, between the actual details of an occurrence and its sensory resonances. He points to the dilemma of the photographic image as fact, as evidence of something specific having happened, and as a means of communicating information about an event, while leaving the viewer unseeing, unmoved and unable to comprehend the truth of the situation. By inviting the viewer to look into the eyes of a

woman—to go eye-to-eye with another human being—Jaar attempts to bridge the gap between reality and its representation and involve us in the atrocity and its ramifications. Through the use of repetition, Jaar asks us to multiply, and keep multiplying, our response to one woman's pain. He wants the viewer to share the horror of what occurred and to be overwhelmed by its magnitude, rather than simply acknowledge the evidence of an event that happened.

Jaar's work aims to overcome what Rancière (2009, pp. 5-6) calls "the distance of representation". According to Rancière (p. 7), the distance experienced by the viewer comes about through the process of "contemplation of the appearance", an appearance that has been "separated from its truth". Looking at an image and contemplating the spectacle portrayed by the image, the viewer becomes alienated from their own being and sense of self within the world. Applying Rancière's argument to our viewing of an everyday newspaper or digital news image, we might think about what we are looking at, draw conclusions and even relay the information, but we are far from fully comprehending the situation. In day-to-day reportage, the news photograph plays a straightforward role of illustrating an event—of providing visual evidence that something worth knowing about has happened. Ordinarily, it neither invites a personal response, nor does it ask us to spend time or energy understanding the situation portrayed. Our contact is typically fleeting, the picture on a page quickly flicked over or present for only seconds on a digital screen, and usually positioned amongst other images and words. Rarely do we look at a regular daily news image with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding of our place in the world.

It is, however, through news imagery that most of us picture the circumstances of refugees and events associated with mass migration and contentious border crossings. Few of us have direct contact with the people involved in such events; we develop our views on the issues and situations from what we hear, read and see in the media. Seeing or looking at news imagery rarely constitutes what Heidegger (1962) describes as an encounter. To have a genuine encounter and to demonstrate care and concern for the circumstances of others requires more than a passing glance. Martin Jay (1993, p. 272) writes that for Heidegger, modern life—which I take to mean the relatively comfortable, affluent lifestyle of the West—had turned the world into what

Heidegger (1962, p. 322) labelled a “standing-reserve” for arrogant human domination. The technology of the camera was highly problematic for Heidegger because, according to Jay (p. 271), “it carried to an extreme the distancing of subject and object”.

Heidegger’s interest lay in how we might exist in the world as beings, aware of and concerned about our relationship with other beings and objects in the world. Rather than regarding other things in the world from a purely visual perspective, he proposed that we develop a “circumspective concern” (Heidegger 1962, p. 263) that would enable us to delve deeper, come closer, uncover, reveal, understand and interpret that which would otherwise be merely the object of our distanced “stare” (Heidegger 1962, p. 190). A more circumspect and concerned type of vision, Jay writes of Heidegger’s proposition, required the viewer to be situated within a visual field rather than outside it. Being inside a situation, rather than outside looking in, would both limit what the viewer could see and alter their relation to the context in which they were embedded, from being controlling to nurturing. This is a core concept in Jaar’s work and it has helped inform my studio practice, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Media reports of the Rwandan crisis, like the reporting of many faraway issues and events, did not invite media consumers to position themselves within the situation. Jaar’s work did. By asking us to look directly into the eyes of a woman who had witnessed unthinkable atrocities, and by giving us nothing but a close-up image of her eyes, repeated so many times that we cannot fail to register them, however distant her circumstances are from ours, Jaar offers us a meaningful encounter: he asks us to engage. As Heidegger (1993, p. 124) argues, such engagement with other beings does not require the viewer “to lose oneself in them” but, rather, allows them “to reveal themselves with respect to what and how they are”. Jaar’s work demonstrates Heidegger’s ideas about engaging with and encountering people in different circumstances from our own; in doing so, he helps to overcome the psychological as well as physical distance between us and the subjects of media reports—a distance that is entrenched by the media image.

3.3 Near and far

In the cropped composition of Condoleezza Rice's head in *The Secretary of State*, a work referred to in Chapter Two, Tuymans brings us even closer to her than we could be when watching the television news. By overcoming the physical distance between viewer and subject—by pulling us in so that we feel we are standing directly in front of her, while also being aware that her image has been sourced from the media—Tuymans points to the inherent distancing effect of mediated vision. *The Secretary of State* makes an explicit reference to how our view of reality is formed by the media's presentation of it, and to how much of what we think we know, or are familiar with, is filtered through layers of media intervention, rather than experienced as an authentic, up-close encounter or engagement. Despite the in-her-face view we get of Rice, the washed-out hues and lack of tonal contrast have a distancing effect, creating a tension between proximity and distance. As Tuymans (2018, p. 186) suggests, the "opulent" flatness created by his horizontal, grid-like brushstrokes and the matt, largely opaque paint thwarts the viewer's gaze; he deliberately prevents us from engaging with a real situation, thereby emphasising the impossibility of doing so through an image.

Storr (2000) attributes this same tension between proximity and distance to Richter's *October 18, 1977* paintings, such as *Funeral* (Figure 25), noting that it arises through Richter's techniques. As explained in Chapter Two, Richter transcribes his source photographs in photo-realist style, then blurs and softens harsh edges and details. While he positions the life-size figures directly before the viewer, Richter creates a distancing effect by obscuring the detail, and relies on us to have sufficient information about the actual events to make the necessary connections between what we see and what we know. When I saw these paintings, I felt I was in the room with the protagonists, but that there was a veil between me and them.

Figure 25: Gerhard Richter, *Funeral*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 200 x 320 cm. From Storr 2000. ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

Gottfried Boehm discusses another kind of distancing in relation to Tuymans' work, which relates more to a delay in time than to a spatial or psychological dissociation. Boehm says that, while he does not immediately recognise the subject matter of Tuymans' paintings, he senses it; what is crucial for Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, p. 59) is that "knowledge is delayed". The paintings, he suggests, guide the viewer towards something visible "that doesn't turn back into conventionality once we know what it is". The "cleft between seeing and knowing" that Boehm (p. 60) identifies is what might differentiate a response to a painting sourced from a photograph from a response to the actual photograph. This form of distance is a positive one that offers the possibility of knowledge and understanding; however, it requires engagement. It is based on the premise that the viewer needs to be sufficiently visually intrigued to spend the time required for a process of understanding to unfold.

Crowther (1993, p. 29) suggests that the content of a painting can be revealed through what he calls an "existential space"—a space to which a viewer brings not only their personal experiences, interests and insights, but also an oblique recognition that they share this space, along with physical space, with those who live in a world of similar social values and conventions. Crowther argues that the object being perceived—the painting—is "charged with meaning". Within the space created, the vast distance between viewer and image collapses and meaning can be accessed; the new space replaces the gap between viewer and situation and, within it, connections

and associations are made. Like Boehm's concept of a painting facilitating delayed knowledge, Crowther's existential space depends on a viewer's attention being captured sufficiently for them to enter into a process of engagement. Painting needs to take on the character of what Crowther (p. 91) describes as "an invitation", whereby the work respects the space of its recipients, rather than attempting to impose an ideology or tell the viewer what to think. It is the painter, however, who needs to create the conditions for this to occur.

3.4 Being there

We sail to the Greek island of Symi from the main port of Kos, which faces the Turkish coastline. On my iPad is a photo saved from an online newspaper that shows one small boatload of refugees making its way across calm, silvery water with the same Turkish backdrop. As we leave Kos, a border patrol boat motors past and I hear a radioed warning to another vessel about it breaching Greek territory. I take a photograph of the patrol boat from the deck of our yacht, with the same landscape background as the image on my iPad.

The work I created from the two photographs—one mediated via an online news publication and the other reflecting my direct experience—comprises two vertical panels (Figure 26). The left-hand panel is light and hazy, with thin layers of paint suggesting a pale landmass beyond a stretch of shimmering sea. A small, dark, formless shape sits centrally, a slight orange tint being the only indication of the life jackets that had become so symbolic of the refugee sea crossings of that time. In the right-hand panel, the central object is clearly depicted as a military boat. It is larger than the vessel in the left-hand image and positioned higher in the image. The sea it traverses is dark blue, rendered in more heavily-textured paint that suggests the motion of waves directly before a viewer. The horizon lines in each of the images also differ, providing a contrasting sense of distance and proximity.

Figure 26: *Different Points of View*, 2016. Oil on linen diptych, 183 x 92 cm each.

At one point, the distance between Symi and the Turkish coast is only metres—just wide enough for us to motor through—and I wonder momentarily why refugees on the Turkish side don't find their way here and swim across, avoiding the treacherous sea crossing by boat. But there is nothing other than rugged, dry, uninhabited land on both sides, and I realise that it is not an option.

The photograph I take of the partially submerged inflatable dinghy in Symi's port is from about two metres above sea level. The photo is not one we would see in the media: it doesn't provide any useful information, or much of a sense of anything. By being there and taking the photograph, the usual distance between me and an event has been reduced, but I am still only an observer and my photo refers to something that has already happened.

I made *Are We There* (2017) in order to examine if my personal experience of encountering and photographing the dinghy would change the way I painted, how I felt about the image, or the way in which a viewer experienced the work. The painting is large, in portrait format (Figure 27). Most of the inflatable boat is rendered realistically, as is the water in the top section of the image. The boat is close to life-size, taking up most of the canvas, and seen from above. The realistic portrayal, however, disintegrates in the bottom-left section, where there is little more than broad brush-strokes of magenta underpainting that fail to reach the edges of the canvas. The illusion of real space inside the shallow hull is challenged by a recognition

that, in the corner, there is nothing more than paint marks on white canvas. I used the vivid magenta hue to interrupt an easy interpretation of a realistically rendered object. Accuracy, control, the careful portrayal of an identifiable object give way to a lack of order, a break-down of precise representation, and an open-ended space that the viewer can fill with their own construction. I wanted the viewer to feel close enough to step down into the dingy, yet be uncertain about the boat's circumstances. The work is not a conventional depiction of a boat at sea or on shore against a scenic background. It provides no answers or clues to the dinghy's history or that of the people who used it. All that can be determined is that it is empty and slowly deflating, with the surrounding water filling its interior.

Figure 27: *Are We There*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 183 x 152 cm.

Ben Quilty's *High Tide Mark* (2016) is a heavy impasto rendering of an oversized life jacket (Figure 28). Against a dark and lifeless purple-black background, the orange life jacket is positioned upright, with a black strap tied around its middle, as if worn by an invisible person. Quilty painted the work following a visit to refugee camps in Europe,

having been asked by the United Nations to document the situation in a different way from standard media representations (Stephens 2016). Quilty has spoken about the humanising effect of this direct experience on his understanding of the refugee issue, which previously had been little more than an abstract concept, despite the streams of news reports and media imagery which dominated news channels for months. He also talks about the paintings that resulted from the trip as being driven by the connections he made between the refugees he met and his own family. After spending time engaging with a child of a similar age to his daughter, Quilty says he retraced the child's steps back to the shoreline, where he found child-size life jackets alongside those of their parents. He tells of the weight he felt in this situation, a weight that he has transferred to canvas through thick, sculpturally applied paint in rich, contrasting hues.

When I eventually viewed this painting—it has been exhibited several times in different locations and contexts—I felt the power of the artist's commitment. From a technical and logistical perspective, Quilty could have painted the work without firsthand experience of the refugee situation but, given his comments on the importance of his actual experience of the camps, it seems unlikely that he would have done so. A viewer of the painting, however, does not need to know about Quilty's personal experience; the formal qualities of the painting—the large scale, contrasting colours and tactile rendering—and the powerful sense of an absent person that emanates from the upright, secured form of the life jacket, have an overpowering effect. Quilty's experience of visiting the camps and spending time with refugees, which resulted in *High Tide Mark* and a continuing artistic interest in the issue, reflects a literal application of the "circumspective concern" proposed by Heidegger (1962, p. 263). Compared with the experience of most news photographers covering the refugee exodus from Turkish to Greek shores at the time, Quilty's experience can also be considered within Bergson's (1946, p. 187) concept that there are two alternative ways to comprehend something—by circling it or by entering into it. While the media crews with their cameras were circling boats teaming with refugees seeking rescue, and driving by beaches littered with life jackets, Quilty was able to enter the situation and engage with affected individuals. Quilty (Buttler 2017, p. 39) has referred to the

single vest of *High Tide Mark* as akin to the idea of the unknown soldier, and "a metaphor for all the human race, adrift"—a recognition of people otherwise overlooked, rather than a representation of what he witnessed.

The question that arises from painting from media photographs that are viewed a long way from where events unfolded—a different experience from Quilty's—is how the artist can draw attention to these different ways of seeing, experiencing and comprehending and, in doing so, affect experiences in relation to the subject matter. Quilty's work, based on direct experience, is not intended as a critique of the nature of media imagery. While it operates to engage an audience in the subject matter and associated issues, it strengthened my sense that my paintings would require a more explicit connection to media imagery if they were to challenge the way in which we view events.

Figure 28: Ben Quilty, *High Tide Mark*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 170.5 x 160.4 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. ©Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

3.5 Residue as an opportunity for engagement

As I worked through this project, my sense of responsibility grew. I looked for opportunities to engage with the issues beyond what I required to make paintings. It was as if, by choosing to paint this subject matter, spending time with images and unavoidably thinking about the circumstances of those I was painting, I had been implicated. Considering the question of how to deal with this sense of residual obligation, Thomas Hill (1996, p. 181) suggests that the only way to avoid tragedy and conflict is "to disengage from political struggles and to retreat into a less challenging private world in which tragic conflicts are avoided by isolating oneself from major world problems". To disengage from the issue of refugees is easy when you live in the comfort of the affluent West: watching television news reports or skimming through images of refugees in our online digital news outlets or newspapers demands very little of us.

I chose to engage with the refugee issue for the sake of a studio-based research project. I recognise that such an engagement evokes emotions like regret and, even more, a sense of impotence. If the news photograph shows us something that happened, it also acts as a residue of that event: it is all that is left from an event; it is all that I have to work with. These events are happening far away from me. Even when I searched the shorelines of Greek islands and spoke to locals caught up in the events, all I could find was the residue of trauma that had been. Unlike the journalist at the centre of an unfolding crisis—or Jaar as he photographed the eyes of a woman who told him what she had witnessed, or Quilty as he made drawings with the young child whose life jacket lay in the discarded piles along the beaches of a Greek island—I have made no direct contact. I wanted my paintings to carry a sense of my frustration, but also of the importance of looking—of not turning away from the problem. The distance between the artist, an audience and the action had to be addressed through paint.

3.6 Painting my way in

The first thing I do when planning a painting is to crop my source image on my laptop. I zoom in and out, move the boundaries of my four-edged grid up and down, left and right, and use my visual judgement to determine what might make a good composition for a painting. In this preliminary stage, I am looking for visual elements that enhance the drama of the picture. The decisions here are particular to painting: the photographer relies largely on framing and lighting to capture interest, but the painter can alter spatial configuration, colour, tonal range, texture, type of brushstroke and degrees of precision.

As I was testing how best to crop a photograph of a group of refugees—each individual cloaked in a metallic-gold thermal blanket as they walk along a wet and muddy shoreline—I was reading Heidegger's and Bergson's theories about encountering and engaging with situations rather than simply viewing them from the perspective of remote spectators. Their ideas were at the forefront of my mind as I considered how, by cropping the photograph, I could shift the spatial relationship between image and viewer, overcome the inherent distancing effect of the media image, and bring both myself and potential viewers closer to the event.

In *Study in Gold* (2016), I made the figures almost life-size and selected a view-point that placed the viewer directly in front of the pictured scene (Figure 29). The objective was to give the viewer a sense of being in close proximity to the figures, as part of the human convoy, but without knowing where the people are headed or where they came from. There is little contextual information but there is sufficient detail to invite consideration of what the viewer is looking at. My intention was to encourage the viewer to contemplate what it might be like to be there with the figures in the painting—wherever there is, and whoever they are.

Zooming in even further, I pushed this idea of reducing the distance between the viewer and the objects in the image so far that all we see in *Study in Gold I* (2017) is the fold-mark pattern and draping of the gold blankets Figure 30). There is no contextual information within this work, so that, in the absence of any external information, it is unlikely that a viewer would know what they were looking at. I have

chosen not to submit these paintings; however, they furthered my understanding of the degree of visual information necessary for a viewer to make an association with an issue or event.

Figure 29 (left): *Study in Gold*, 2016. Oil on linen, 168 x 112 cm.

Figure 30 (right): *Study in Gold I*, 2017. Oil on linen, 112 x 92 cm.

I applied this zooming-in technique, in varying degrees, to most of my source images, to reduce the distance between the subject matter of the paintings and their viewers. In *Take My Hand* (2017-18), the figures are again close to life-size; the viewer is asked to relate to them as fellow human beings, positioned only metres in front of them (Figure 31). No horizon is depicted; in two of the three panels that constitute the work there is a section suggesting space beyond the expanse of bluish surface, and I have used thick strokes of paint to avoid a conventionally illusionistic sense of depth that might be expected from an area of hazy background sea and sky. The pale, shimmering sea and sky section is painted as thickly as the dark blue foreground, giving the background equal importance within the image and suggesting that all elements, including painter and viewer, exist together in a shallow space. Parts of the image are repeated across the three panels so that they cannot be combined to create a unified picture. This strategy emphasises the fractured nature of the image and its content, and aims to highlight the difficulty in understanding the complexities of any event. The panels can be exhibited in any order and a change in their placement on the wall can alter the way in which the event is interpreted.

As with *Study in Gold,* manipulation of the viewer's sight-line in relation to the subject matter was a tactic used in *Take My Hand* to suggest that all parties are involved in the situation. The unfolding action is foregrounded and cropped to such an extreme degree that the viewer is unable to see the full picture. While a standing figure in one of the panels is almost complete, only parts of limbs and heads are visible in the other two panels—the rest of their bodies are cut off by the frame, dissolving into the painting's ground, or obscured in a loosely rendered depiction of dark, rough sea. By varying the thickness and application of paint within each panel to emphasise surface materiality, rather than an illusion of objects and figures in space, and by providing only enough detail to show the presence of anonymous individuals, the work is designed to raise questions around the relative importance of elements within the image and what it is that is really being depicted. As with *Are We There,* I left areas at the edges and corners of the panels unfinished, with either the white canvas or vividly coloured underpainting showing through. This strategy has other effects that I discuss in the next chapter, but it is also intended to challenge our sense of distance between faraway problems that we view through the media and our own lives.

Figure 31: *Take My Hand*, 2017-18, Oil on canvas triptych, two panels of 183 x 92 cm and one of 183 x 123 cm.

3.7 Grounded in reality

Boehm argues that an image can only show us something in conjunction with its ground, and the viewer cannot pass through an image because there is always a ground, whether it be a primed white canvas, a background layer of paint that bears no relation to illusionistic space, or a recognisable background such as land, sea, earth or a wall. The relationship between the ground and the figures or objects within an image is the "pivotal point" in the image, according to Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, p. 162). Altering or emphasising the differentiation, or lack of it, between the inexplicit ground and the explicit elements of an image can change the nature or interpretation of a painting. Boehm's identification of this "pivotal point" has informed my understanding of how the ground could be manipulated to alter a viewer's reading of a scene and engage them in elements of a painting that they might otherwise overlook.

In Manet's cut and reassembled version of *The Execution of Maximilien* (see Chapter Two), there are multiple grounds, each of which operates to shift the relationship between the depicted figures, their background or context, and the viewer. The ground of the original painting is a green-brown field on which the figures stand; there are bluish hills on the horizon and a cloudy, grey sky. Manet cut four sections from the original work and attached them to a beige support, so that, while the parts are in approximately the correct formation, there are gaps between them—pieces are missing, and large areas of the support are visible. In doing this, Manet introduced a second ground which, rather than altering the composition, has the effect of drawing attention to the relationship between the figures, and between the figures and background. These relationships, Manet seems to say, are open to interpretation and can change according to circumstances. By showing that parts of a painting can be repositioned and given a new background, he invites the viewer to continue moving the segments in their imagination. He also suggests that the ground, and therefore the context in which the elements of the painting are situated, is limitless. There is a bigger picture than is presented by the painter, and the context of that picture is one for the viewer to create. Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, pp. 161-

162) supports this idea, arguing that the "implicit" nature of the ground in a painting places it "in the realm of the unordered". There is something there, but it is something as yet undisclosed. This idea informed the progression of the studio work, in which I tested how the ground of a painting could be exploited to achieve my aim of engaging the viewer and encouraging them to consider, and take some responsibility for, the painting's content.

3.8 Context changes everything, yet things stay the same

The role of context in interpreting a painting is dramatically outlined in a work Tuymans exhibited as part of his major Qatar retrospective (see Chapter Two). As its title indicates, *Demolition* (2005) portrays what appears to be a dense wall of billowing, pale and pinkish-grey smoke or concrete dust from the demolition of a building (Figure 32). The smoke, or dust, rendered with dull, matt paint, fills the large canvas, and we are provided with no other visual detail, information or tonal contrasts; any pointers to time or place have been engulfed in the smoke.

In an article (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 61) written to coincide with the Qatar exhibition, Jan Avgikos describes *Demolition* as relating to the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001. In an interview in the same publication, Tuymans himself (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 51) says it was based on the demolition of a building in Chicago in 1995. It is likely that when Tuymans painted the work in 2005—after the events of 9/11—he was deliberately trying to provoke an association with those events. It is unsurprising, then, that Avgikos made this association in the context of an exhibition in a Middle Eastern country. Thus, the painting is more a commentary on the way in which we read an image—which depends on its context and our experiences—than it is about any particular event. Tuymans (Cooke & Simoens 2015, p. 16) has spoken about his interest in how past events can make new sense in a new context. For Jacques Derrida (1987, pp. 9-12), a painting is always affected by its surrounds, or physical context, as well as by its associations and historical conventions. Even the walls play a role in how paintings might be read. Tuymans (2018, p. 131) says he never

hangs a painting in the middle of a wall because it needs to oppose the space in which it is exhibited and take on a life of its own.

Figure 32: Luc Tuymans, *Demolition,* 2005. Oil on canvas, 165 x 113 cm. Photo by Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York, London.

When I walked into a room of the Fondation Louis Vuitton on the outskirts of Paris and saw for the first time a huge diptych by French-Chinese artist Yan Pei-Ming, titled *Les Temps Modernes* (2015), I thought immediately of Goya's panoramic *Peregrinación a la Fuente de San Isidro (Pilgrimage of San Isidro)* (1819-23). Goya's work—one of the *Black Paintings* hanging a national border away in Madrid's Prado Museum—has always struck me as an image of migration or exodus. Despite its title alluding to the annual festive celebration of San Isidro, the drab painting in browns, blacks and a little white, depicting a serpentine line of figures across a barren landscape, suggests misery, madness and impending doom (Figure 34). Yan's paintings are even darker and more indeterminate than Goya's, but the thick deep-blue brushstrokes of the right-hand canvas reveal a similar snaking line of figures that disappears into the horizon (Figure 33).

The title of Yan's work supports my sense that this is his contemporary interpretation of an old theme: modern times do not seem so different from times past. Standing in front of Yan's work, it occurred to me that, in representing the same subject matter as painters throughout the eras, painting could emphasise connections between events of today and of those before and, therefore, imbue the conditions of current events with a deeper sense of humanity. Today's events are acknowledged as part of the continuum of history, and they too will be reinterpreted by artists of the future to help make sense of their world. Adding to the chain of painterly representation of events in our world engenders a significance beyond the immediateness and transience of a daily news broadcast.

Figure 33: Yan Pei-Ming, *Les Temps Modernes*, 2015. Oil on canvas diptych, 280 x 400 cm each. ©Yan Pei-Ming/ADAGP, Paris, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Photo Fondation Louis Vuitton/Martin Argyroglo.

Figure 34: Francisco de Goya , *Peregrinación a la Fuente de San Isidro*, 1819-23. Oil mural transferred to canvas, 140 x 438 cm. ©Museo Nacional del Prado.

I painted *Wrong Time, Wrong Place* (2016) from a still that I selected from a video clip recorded by someone standing on a train platform at the time of several coordinated terrorist bombings in Brussels. The short video was published as an eye-witness

account of the underground train attack within an online news report. As a potential image on which to base a painting, it appealed to me because of its visual ambiguity, as well as its representation of an incident that was being closely tied at the time to the migration issue, due to the perceived threat of anti-Western terrorists infiltrating the masses of genuine refugees seeking asylum in northern Europe.

The still that I selected contrasted extreme light against dark, making it difficult to discern shapes and relationships between elements, and the details of both the train and the figures inside it and on the platform in the foreground were unclear. From the image alone, without the context of the full video and accompanying news report, it was impossible to determine what was happening. I painted the work with a similar lack of detail as the cropped video-still, focusing more on a white flash of light against the dark foreground than on the blurry figures (Figure 35). In composing the painting and deciding on its large scale, my intention was to place the viewer within the situation—in this case in the position of the person who was filming the incident. The high degree of indeterminateness and ambiguity in the image was intended to leave the viewer unsure of what they were part of.

While I expected, and wanted, to create confusion and uncertainty around what the painting portrayed, I was surprised that many viewers at the opening of my 2017 exhibition, *Breaching Borders,* associated the image with a scene from the Holocaust and the movement by train of Jews to concentration camps. Viewers eventually worked out that this interpretation could not be correct because of what appears to be a contemporary lighting system within the carriages, but that was the way in which they were able, initially, to reconcile the painting within the context of the broader exhibition and its refugee theme. As part of an exhibition about refugees, *Wrong Time, Wrong Place* was assumed to be an image of an enforced migratory event. I took from this experience that any painting I exhibited within the context of this project would be seen to refer to themes of migration and refugees, regardless of the painting's content. Likewise, most of the paintings, if displayed outside the context of my project and without the viewer knowing about my project, could take on completely different meanings and interpretations that, in the absence of any other

contextual information, would depend on the surrounds, background and experiences of the viewer.

Figure 35: *Wrong Time, Wrong Place*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

3.9 On the other hand

Most media photography is, as Barthes (2000, pp. 90-91) states, "undialectical": "It fills the sight by force, and … in it nothing can be refused or transformed". And as Jay (1993, p. 455) writes, photographs are disseminated so widely that they become the "banal and omnipresent 'reality' of normal life". We develop our view of reality, formulate our opinions, and respond to situations and issues playing out around the world through what we read, hear and see in the media. However, as Barthes suggests, media photographs give us only one perspective. There are rarely complexities or contradictions within, or alternative interpretations of, a newspaper photograph or television footage. What we see is "clear evidence of what was there"

(Jay 1993, p. 451, quoting Barthes), but what we do not see is why it occurred, how it might have been different, what might be its consequences, or how it relates to anything else that is happening. We are so inured to media imagery that, as theorists such as Crowther, Levi Strauss and Jay argue, our seeing is passive, unengaged and unthinking.

The opportunity for other perspectives, different ways of thinking and alternative possibilities can be realised through art, according to these theorists. Crowther (1993, p. 17) suggests one way in which art operates to make us see with greater depth, intensity and consideration is through the "shock" of "an encounter with an original", which contrasts with the "manic conformity" (p. 13) of the visual reproductions we see all around us. According to Crowther's argument, therefore, an encounter with a painting based on a photograph of a newsworthy event has the ability, through its status as an original artwork, to halt the manic activity of visual information and engage us with subject matter that we might otherwise fail to register. The image offers the viewer an opportunity to bring their own perspective to their experience of a painting; it invites us to acknowledge different points of view from those we have previously entertained. I cannot control how a viewer will interpret a painting, nor is that my intention. But I can use the paintings to encourage a viewer to consider their perspective on the subject matter and how they might have reached that point of view. The paintings can point to other ways of understanding—other possible meanings.

3.10 A shift in perspective

The process of cropping a source image inevitably involves a shift in visual perspective. As I move the boundaries of a source photograph, my viewpoint in relation to the image changes. It can move closer or further away from the scene depicted; it can shift lower or higher, and to the left or the right. As long as I comply with my self-imposed rule of not inventing elements beyond the edges of the photo, it will always be constrained by what is represented in the source photograph.

I examined the effect of a slight shift in perspective in the two paintings, *Parallel Lines* (2017) and *Parallel Lines I* (2018) by selecting two square compositions from a single photograph. The images overlap to a large degree but, looking from one to the other, we see that the parallel lines and the trail of figures walking along them are positioned differently. The two paintings depict the same scene, but it is as if the scene is being viewed from separate locations or from two different perspectives. Our viewpoint shifts again due to the contrast in the scale of the paintings. The large version (Figure 36) evokes a scenario that appears to be within our reach; the viewer could be standing at a high window looking down on a scene below. In the small version (Figure 37), the viewer is required to move in closer to make out the loosely painted figures; the work invites a more intimate engagement than a viewer could have in reality without a set of binoculars. The two paintings, hung near each other, encourage a viewer to look between them and recognise a change in how they are viewing the situation. In both, the cropping of the images and the compositional use of shadows emphasise a sense of surveying the illuminated scenario beneath, attesting to Heidegger's (1962, p. 322) description of the "standing-reserve" perspective of the arrogant modern human.

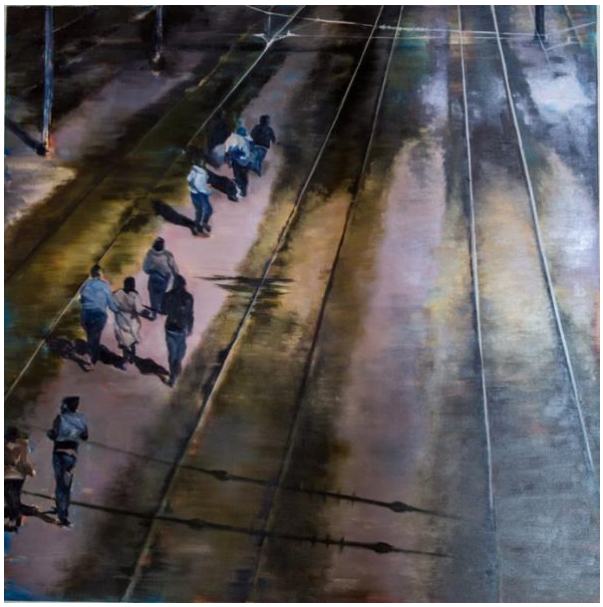


Figure 36 (left): *Parallel Lines*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 168 x 168 cm.

Figure 37 (right): *Parallel Lines I*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.

In both the larger, first *Parallel Lines* work and *Are We There*, I painted thin washes of bright colour—yellow, blue and magenta—onto the white canvas. My initial intention in leaving parts of this coloured ground exposed was to draw attention to the paintings as objects in their own right, rather than as painted copies of photographic images. The sections of ground that bore no relation to the depiction of figures and objects were designed to evoke questions and avoid them being passed over as conventional representations. From these works, however, I realised that the coloured ground could serve several functions: as well as emphasising the paintings' differences from photographic images and raising issues in relation to representation, it opened interpretive possibilities for the viewer.

The smaller, second version, *Parallel Lines I,* was painted almost a year after the large work. By this stage in the project I was consumed by how I could more effectively facilitate, through formal devices, a viewer's ability and desire to create their own meaning from my paintings, rather than simply present them with a picture of something. As well as changing the scale and perspective from the original version, I covered most of the white canvas with a vivid magenta oil wash. This hue was the most artificial of the colours I had been using, contrasting dramatically with the dark and earthy colours of the source image. It also referenced the occasional stripes of coloured ink that were distorting the print-outs of the photographic images on which I based the paintings—the three colours of magenta, cyan blue and yellow being the constituent hues of all my printed images. The magenta ground is a strong, almost dominant element of *Parallel Lines I.* It is intended to confront and unnerve the viewer, while also operating to fascinate and draw them into the painting. It suggests that something else is going on in the image, something that has no relationship with the depicted scene. I identified the exposure of the magenta ground as a strategy that could be used to invite a viewer to form their own interpretation of what they see.

3.11 Contextualising with text or image

A media photograph rarely appears without some accompanying text, or voice-over in the case of television news, that provides at least the basic contextualising facts of

what we are looking at and where and when it occurred. Barthes (1977, pp. 25-27) proposes that the text which accompanies a media photograph operates to "sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image". Text, he argues, "loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination". Often, the text is "simply amplifying a set of connotations already given in the photograph". Even when it is doing only that much, the inevitable accompanying text is another barrier to media photographs being able to take on a significance beyond the event they depict or have the potential for alternative interpretations and possibilities. Conversely, the absence of explanatory text within, or in support of a painting, helps free the image to be experienced in various ways, without the viewer being given a defined context in which to consider it. At times, the viewer has nothing more than a painting's title, date of execution and artist's name to provide context—all of which can and do influence the experience of the work, but in a much less prescribed manner than the text of a media photograph.

Expanding Crowther's argument that viewers bring their own experiences and perspectives to their interpretation of an image, James Elkins (1997, p. 146) claims we cannot see what we do not understand, use or identify with. His statement, that "vision can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it", supports Crowther's view that media imagery acts like noisy wallpaper: it surrounds us constantly, is full of visual patterns, and yet we fail to register the content. The metaphorical blindness to which Elkins (1997, p. 219) refers, whereby "there are objects in every scene that we do not see—both psychologically and physiologically", is reflected in my paintings through the difficulty in determining what it is that is represented. We know we are looking at a real scene, that an event of some sort is unfolding, but precisely who the figures represent, where they are, and what some of the pictured objects are, is difficult to determine. Unpainted areas are left exposed; some sections are more sketchily rendered than others; faces, limbs and bodies are portrayed with less care than their surroundings and the objects they carry. The viewer is asked to work through their blindness, to broaden their perspective, and to acknowledge that, in viewing the everyday traumas depicted in the media, they might not be looking hard enough.

Reinforcing the importance of the painter's deliberate withholding of descriptive information, Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, p. 153) posits that it is the "indefiniteness" of a painting that enables something in the image to present itself to him, rather than it simply being there. The indefiniteness of an image, Boehm suggests, is a moment in time when the image is allowed to "come into its own", bringing into it all the external contextual information that we, as viewers, have. Using a term more usually associated with words, Boehm says that indefiniteness in painting is a powerful "deictic" practice, whereby meaning is construed according to context (p. 153).

3.12 Seeing things differently

Walk on By (2017) is a large, square painting that shows a well-built, blonde and fair-skinned, bikini-clad woman walking along a beach, the sun casting her long shadow (Figure 38). I rendered the life-size figure realistically; her surrounds, however, while recognisable as the lightly lapping water of a coastline with a green bushy interior, are not identifiable as any particular location. I painted the elements of the beach environment loosely, with thin washes of pale paint and imprecise but thicker daubs of green. There are two other loosely defined figures in the background, who also appear to be dressed for beach activities. The only element of the image that suggests something other than an ordinary beach scene is an orange object on the left-hand lower side of the canvas. In another installation context—one outside the migration theme—this object might be correctly identified as a life jacket, but it would not hold any set significance. In the context of an exhibition based on the theme of refugees, as was the case in my first exhibition during this project, viewers readily identified the object and understood the scene to be a depiction of a Western beachgoer passing, unaware and unseeing, the remnants of a refugee's journey. Yet there was still confusion about the image. I had deliberately painted the object in the woman's hand so that it is impossible to tell what it is. In truth, I could not discern from my source photograph what the object was, and I saw an opportunity to try to make the point that we do not always understand what it is we are looking at. Several women at the

exhibition opening sought me out to tell me how discomforting they found the painting—how they felt that they could be the woman in the bikini, that they could see themselves in her place.

Figure 38: *Walk on By*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

Just weeks after the exhibition opening, I was holidaying in Greece, having lengthy conversations with restaurant and hotel managers about the impact on their businesses of the surge of refugees in the previous tourism season. These were people who had helped where they could, housing and feeding refugee families who had come ashore on the type of small inflatable dinghy I was later to photograph. They were not resentful about the situation, but their restaurants and hotels were almost empty. The hordes of northern European holidaymakers, who came each year to soak up the southern sun, had not returned this year. I thought about the woman in my painting.

3.13 Trying to understand

Francisco Cantú's maternal grandfather crossed the border from Mexico to the United States when he was a young boy. Cantú, like his mother, grew up in America. Having studied border policy as part of an international relations degree, Cantú tells his mother that he wants to see the realities of the border to truly understand the place. He feels that he needs direct experience, despite his mother's insistence that there are a hundred other ways of knowing a place. "I'll never understand it unless I'm close to it", Cantú (2018, p. 230) explains in his book about his experiences as a US border patrol agent. During his time as an active agent on patrol, Cantú is haunted by a dream that he feels must signify something. One morning, he stares into the mirror "trying to recognize myself" (p. 1299). Cantú acknowledges his attempt to put himself into the experience, to understand who he is in relation to the experience and the problem; he wants to know where he fits. Struggling with the realisation that his experience can never be the same as those attempting to cross the border, and that he can never really share their experience, he decides to write his story. Writing, he says, "seemed like a good way to make sense of what I'd seen" (p. 1299).

As I read his book, I realised that I was feeling a similar way about my paintings. The process of painting had become my way of working through the issues and engaging with them. I had taken every opportunity to talk with locals on the Greek islands where refugees had come ashore in their thousands seeking help; I had seen evidence of their perilous sea crossings; I had watched documentaries, sought out testimonials, experienced the tension on the streets of Paris with the dual presence of refugees and armed soldiers alert for terrorists. However, living in Australia, acutely aware of my isolation from where the issues were playing out on a daily basis, I understood that I could never really experience or comprehend the reality of these situations. But I could paint. I could, as David Joselit (2013, p. 14) suggests, attempt to "mark the flow of experience"—an engagement that aligns with Barbara Bolt's (2004) interpretation of Heidegger's notion of being in the midst of things, positing that the painter is neither detached nor privileged but, through the process of painting, merely exists among other things.

3.14 To conclude

In this chapter I have considered the themes of distance, perspective and context in relation to how we view and understand things going on in the world. The chapter addresses the inherent distancing effect of media imagery, and I identify strategies that painting can employ to draw attention to, and attempt to overcome, a sense of distance. I discuss how I have addressed the theme of perspective in the submitted paintings, which reveal a way in which painting can challenge the viewer's perspective on a situation. Acknowledging the significance of the context in which paintings are viewed has established the importance of the exhibition setting in generating meaning and new understanding for the viewer. The chapter also begins to address how paintings might be charged with an ability to absorb external factors in the process of their viewing. An exploration of ideas around how painting can operate to create new knowledge and suggest alternative courses of action is continued in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Movement, Potential and Performativity

"Images today are bound to travel and we can only make of them what we will."

—T. J. Demos (2013, p. 89)

4.1 Introduction

Proposing the refugee as an embodiment of an alternative future for the world, in which the concept of the nation-state loses its primacy, Demos (2013, p. 4) raises the prospect of opportunity and potential. He suggests that in movement and mobility there is "productive possibility": if a work of art can dislocate the viewer's "space, time of perception and self-positioning", then "mobility becomes a shared experience between artist and viewer" (p. 17).

In this chapter I address the notion that painting, through its materiality and mobility, its unique nature and its ability to generate alternative meanings, can give rise to a sense of possibility in our understanding of what we are seeing. Rather than being viewed as an account of something that has happened, painting can suggest ongoing states of being, for which different outcomes are possible. I explore the idea that movement and potential can be active states of a painting that enable an experience of motion and provide an opportunity for alternative ways of thinking about and understanding issues. I also consider how the formal language of painting can make evident the conflict, tension and provisionality inherent in the subject matter. Movement in the form of the circulation and temporary exhibition of paintings is another strategy I explore as a means to provoke awareness of transience and impermanence as defining characteristics of our time.

A central concern of this project is how painting can facilitate an engagement with, or an experience of, something real, for both artist and audience. The concept of performativity is considered in relation to the process of painting, to the ongoing life of images, and to a viewer's interaction with paintings. I discuss how the concepts of movement, potential and performativity apply, in varying degrees, to the work of several painters who address real events. Within the framework of this field of painters and theorists, I describe my own process of experimentation and discovery in

the studio and identify how painting can create the conditions to facilitate audience engagement with the issues that are their subject matter.

4.2 A different outcome

Writing about the work of French artist Gérard Fromanger—who in the 1970s painted close-up city scenes from either found photographs or those taken himself—Foucault (Deleuze & Foucault 1999, p. 95) argued that these paintings do not "capture" or "fix" images but, rather, pass them on to provide new paths and directions for interpretation, thereby starting them on a process of motion, transition and "transposition". Foucault links Fromanger's work to the artists of late nineteenth-century France when, for the first time, images were reproduced and circulated between print, paint and photographic media. He writes (p. 84) that the artists of this era were "in love with … the images themselves, with their migration and perversion, their transvestism, their disguised difference". The new realism in painting that emerged from this era, exemplified by Courbet and Manet was, Foucault argues, inexorably linked to "this great surge and flurry of multiple and similar images" (p. 84).

Foucault points to two paintings by Fromanger of rebellious prisoners on a roof based on a press photograph that had been widely reproduced (Figures 39 and 40). Fromanger painted the images as they are in the photograph, and in black and white. He then inserted flat, block-coloured geometric shapes into the image, some of them obscuring the heads of the prisoners, others randomly scattered. These blocks of colour alter the way we read the image, challenging the way in which it is understood. Foucault (Deleuze & Foucault 1999, p. 94) questions whether anyone had ever acknowledged "the unique and multiple event" that circulates within the photograph. Through his transformation of the image, Foucault suggests, Fromanger draws attention to the nature of an event, which is at once unique and able to be interpreted in multiple ways. The press photograph, Foucault argues, is static and closed; in painting the same image, the artist gives it continuing life, potential, possibility and opportunity. The artworks, he writes, "spring out from a single photograph to diverge in different paintings, each of which in turn could give rise to … a new dispersion of

events" (p. 99). The photograph is opened up by painting, "which itself evokes and communicates these unlimited images".

This is what a painting based on a real event can do. The source photograph represents just one moment in the past and tells us what happened at that moment. Because it is absolute and unequivocal, we do not attempt to imagine an alternative course of events. In its transformation from a photographic image, a painting can develop in unlimited ways and, therefore, suggest unlimited possibilities. This concept of continuation and potential—of things still being in progress and of outcomes yet to be determined—is pivotal to my argument that painting can enable an active participation in world issues.

Figures 39 (left) and 40 (right): Gérard Fromanger, *En révolte à la prison de Toul I* and *II*, 1974. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. From Deleuze & Foucault 1999.

Every painting is unique, however close one version might be to another. Each painting is executed manually within conditions that are specific to it and that cannot be reproduced exactly. The number of paintings and, therefore, outcomes that can be produced is infinite. However, for a viewer to recognise a sense of potential, they must engage with the work in an active manner. Boehm (Tuymans & DeWolf 2018, p. 146) posits that this occurs through the mental ordering of the elements within a painting. While a painting presents as a single entity that hangs in a fixed position on a wall, Boehm suggests that its internal elements are waiting to be activated. According to Boehm, the viewer needs to accept the potential for movement within the painting: it is only when the viewer has registered the individual elements and their ability to

move that the image and its potential for meaning emerge. This idea reinforces Foucault's concept of the painting as a live and dynamic entity that gives rise to constantly shifting interpretations. While Boehm argues that "an image depends on movement in order to realize itself" and to avoid being simply a "physical 'fact' on the wall" (p. 146), it is the painter who must provide sufficient visual interest for the viewer to recognise this potential for movement.

These ideas around movement within a painting are particularly relevant to the project because they mirror its theme of migration and the restriction of movement of people across borders. As the research progressed, an evocation of what Boehm describes as "potential for movement" became an increasingly important consideration. Formal strategies through which this might be achieved, such as the blurring of painted edges, are evident in Richter's *October 18, 1977* paintings, which I have discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Another Richter work, however, provides an example of how the nature of a depicted event can hinder a painting's ability to give rise to ongoing possibilities.

September (2009), a photographic print of a painting with the same title, was exhibited as part of the 2017-18 Richter exhibition at GOMA (Figure 41). Richter describes these high-quality prints produced from his original works as *editions*, a strategy he uses to emphasise his interest in duplicating, repeating and circulating imagery. *September* is a small blurred image that appears as two skyscrapers set against soft blue sky and obscured by dense grey smoke. We read the image this way because we recognise the scene. Despite the impression of deliberately smeared paint across the surface and an absence of identifying detail, we know we are looking at a representation of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre just after one or both planes were flown by terrorists into the buildings. We have seen multiple images of this scene and, on encountering Richter's work, we immediately make a connection to the event. Our awareness and recall of the event are so strong that even the title *September* is loaded with association.

At the symposium that coincided with the exhibition, Stefan Gronert (2017) argued that the problem with *September* is that we know the outcome. We have all the information and have dealt with the ramifications and consequences of the event.

There is nothing more that Richter's image can tell us about what occurred on that day in September or how we feel about it. Considered in the context of Foucault's commentary on Fromanger's *En révolte à la prison de Toul* (1974)*, September* does not, and cannot, offer any alternative possibilities. If the test of a painting based on a real situation is, as Foucault posits, whether or not it gives rise to a new formulation of events, then *September* fails. Perhaps, because we know this image so well, we are left with no imaginative space to enable movement; the relationship between the facts and what we see in the image is set; the various elements of the image have nowhere else to go.

As explained in my introduction, I have intuitively avoided selecting source photographs that have become iconic images of the refugee crisis, or even those that I thought viewers might recognise, as the basis of paintings. Gronert's comments helped me understand why I was choosing less identifiable source material. Nothing can be added to an image that viewers are familiar with, or that they think they already understand. If a viewer knows the details of a particular situation or the outcome of the circumstances pictured, then there can be no capacity for movement, potential or alternative interpretations.

Figure 41: Gerhard Richter, *September (Ed.139)*, 2009. Print between glass, 66 x 89.8 cm. Collection Dallas Museum of Art, USA. ©Gerhard Richter 2019 (27022019)

Writing about theatre, Rancière (2009, pp. 11-13) notes that a spectator will be captivated by what plays out before them if, and because, the spectator forms a

connection to the scene they are witnessing. Rancière proposes this form of engagement as an active participation in a "shared world" in which the spectator "observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen". As Rancière suggests, it is not the artist's knowledge of something, or the visual information presented by the painter, that is being transmitted to the viewer through the image. Rather, what is transmitted is an opportunity for the viewer to construct their own story, enabling the viewer to make associations between the image, the artist and themselves. This understanding of the way in which a viewer engages with a painting reinforces the argument that the work needs to offer the potential for a new space to be created. If the image is so complete that the viewer cannot find any room for their own story, as with *September,* then they will have no interest in engaging. The painted image cannot be so prescribed as to refute alternative interpretations or the discovery of layers of meaning.

4.3 Painting beyond an event

Until the last phase of this research project, and as described in Chapter Two, I started each painting by gridding the canvas to match a grid system on my source image. This process ensured that the various elements of what were quite complex figurative images were in the correct formation with each other, and that the figures and objects depicted were believable, even if their circumstances were difficult to determine. This strategy was used to reinforce an awareness that the images were based on real events, rather than something from my imagination. I did not leave any evidence of this process; however, over the course of the project I became increasingly concerned that the rigidity of this technique might force a privileging of factual representation. To paint more intuitively—in a manner driven more by the requirements of the materials and formal concerns than by a need to accurately transcribe the image—and to give the viewer an opportunity to rearrange the painting's elements and discover potential within it, I needed to abandon the grid. Doing away with this systematic process would also help avoid the characteristics of representation—superiority and objectifying portrayals—against which Demos warns.

Australian artist Helen Johnson discusses these problems of representation in relation to her paintings and considers ways in which art might call attention to political ideas without appearing didactic or exploiting a privileged position. One option for the artist, Johnson suggests (2015, p. 43), is to apply both "contextual specificity and representational ambiguity". For her *Warm Ties* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (2017), Johnson painted a set of large, unframed canvases to hang within the space, rather than on the walls. Her tactic of hanging the canvases from metal rods requires viewers to navigate them as objects in space (Figure 42). An audience cannot avoid the actual canvases or the overload of imagery that physically confronts them. Figures and objects are bound together on a surface by purely formal elements of colour and shape. The paintings do not suggest narratives so much as bombard an audience with references and associations and set up a challenge to try to make sense of it all. The overcrowded figurative images, layered and rendered in many different styles, ask their viewers to think about how historical events are represented and point to a variety of possible interpretations. Helen Hughes (2018, p. 22) writes that the work aims to "incite self-reflection by promoting viewers (and indeed, the artist herself) to confront their own potential complicity" in past and present events.

Johnson posits that an aesthetic experience can produce a reflective distance for the viewer, enabling a renewed contemplation of a given context and the viewer's position within it. Contemplating the work in this manner, she argues (Johnson 2015, p. 34), does not constitute political participation, "but it can change one's sense of oneself in the world". Johnson recognises painting's potential to shift the relationship between a viewer and things going on in the world. She refers to Theodor Adorno's argument that an artist's motivations are always related to experiences of the objective world, despite art being an attempt to recoil from reality. Adorno's (2013, p. 7) contention that "the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" is what, he argues, defines the relationship between art and society. This reinforces my sense that the process of painting, and the way in which paint is applied, is mirroring my thoughts about the issues. The formal concerns,

and the artist's effort in attempting to resolve the formal issues of painting, can reflect the complexities of the issues that are the subject matter of the image.

Figure 42: Helen Johnson, *A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, wood. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney. Photo by Tania Price.

Early in this project, a photograph of a large group of refugees standing behind temporary steel barriers captured my attention. One of the men was holding an intriguing object—a flesh-coloured body-brace in the shape of a female torso. I was struck by how difficult it must be to decide what are the most important things to take with you when you flee your home, unsure of where you will go or where you will end up, and not knowing what you or your family will need along the way. I cropped the photograph so that the body-brace became the central feature of the image, then produced a painting that was transcribed using my gridding process, so that all the features were in the correct place relative to one another.

The resulting image (Figure 43) frustrated me: it was too static and inert; there was nowhere for the viewer to go with it. I had painted this image over an opaque

layer of raw sienna in a deliberate attempt to reference a commonly used ground in Renaissance painting and, hence, suggest a continuum of narrative painting. The ground, however, did what it does in traditional painting—it unified the image, which, I realised, hindered the effect of unease and provisionality I was attempting to suggest.

Much later, I revisited the image to test my concern about the inhibiting effect of the grid, as well as to use the strategy employed in the small *Parallel Lines I*, in which I had painted a thin ground of magenta on parts of the white canvas support. In the second version of *What Should We Take* (2018), there are fewer outlines and carefully measured forms; the paint is applied less cautiously and with less precision (Figure 44). I left parts of the canvas and the magenta underpainting exposed, and I dragged, pushed and rubbed paint. The sharp shift between the painted image and the exposed section of white and magenta ground resists an easy acknowledgement of a depicted scene: it is there to alert the viewer to something unstable and uncertain—to circumstances that are unreconcilable with what we know and are familiar with. The artificially coloured gaps in the image suggest unfinished business, a situation yet to be resolved or concluded, and conflicting, confronting elements of reality.

Figures 43 (left) and 44 (right): Two versions of *What Should We Take*, 2016 and 2018. Oil on canvas, 138 x 122 cm each.

I painted *Study in Gold*, as well as other early works, on a linen support that, due to its natural earthy colour and heavily textured surface, made the unpainted sections seem

like part of the ground on which the figures were walking. The exposed areas were an attempt to shift the viewer's understanding of what they are looking at: from a representation of a scene to an object that is no more than a combination of materials. My intention was to provoke consideration about how we view images of events, and to draw attention to how painting differs from the photographic imagery we are used to seeing through the media. The organic nature of the textured linen had the effect of becoming a natural part of the object, interacting with the paint rather than simply providing a surface on which to create an image. I had used the same material as a support in my Honours project and had enjoyed exploiting its ability to meld with the painted image. Now, I decided to test how differently a smooth, white-primed canvas would operate.

With a white canvas support, however, I needed to prevent the image looking like a copy of a smooth, evenly presented photograph. As I have described, I introduced washes of vivid colour on parts of the white surface, some of which are left revealed in the final image. These areas of contrasting colour operate differently in each of the works. While the magenta sections in *What Should We Take* might signal alarm, peers in a critique session suggested that in other works there is a redemptive quality to the underlying colour. What the sections of vividly coloured underpainting do across all the works is fracture our vision of a uniform two-dimensional image. Through their artificiality and incongruity, the contrasting areas set up a tension: they act like irresistible, if incomprehensible, windows into the images, inviting viewers to spend time in the spaces and work out what else might be there. By breaking up the surface image and introducing unexplained areas of unnatural colour on white canvas, the paintings offer potential for shifts of thought and alternative interpretations.

4.4 Moving through the world

Bennett (Bal & Hernández-Navarro 2011, pp. 15-17) suggests that, in the migration of people and the staging of exhibitions and movement of artwork between settings, a parallel process can be discerned: both are provisional and transitional in nature. New temporary communities, of both migrants and artwork, are continually formed outside

of their previous and future contexts. Movement happens in relation to time and place, causing one's situation to change. Movement, Bennett argues, embodies tension, and art makes tension visible because it stages it. In doing so, art provides an opportunity for the viewer to experience tension in a different way: tension, she claims, becomes inhabitable, providing a sense of welcome instead of repulsion. Bennett suggests that the viewer is drawn into the experience of migration by the nature of a temporary staging of art, away from the context of its making. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011, p. 17) state, "We can situate ourselves in that transit from one place and time to another, as a permanent state of impermanence".

For my second exhibition from this project, I set out to create a sense of tension around the idea of movement and to disrupt viewers' expectations of where paintings belong and how they should operate in an exhibition. The concept of potential—a sense that the paintings, as objects, had possibilities and opportunities beyond their immediate situation—underpinned the installation. Bennett does not suggest that the subject matter of an artwork must allude to migration in order for the viewer to be drawn into the experience of migration, but the combination of subject matter and its staging—the parallel experiences of viewing migration-related imagery and recognising a sense of movement and tension from the temporary nature of the exhibition—strengthen the work's content.

My initial interest in staging a second exhibition was to get a sense, however intangible and unmeasurable, of whether the work operated differently in a different context—one year later, in another gallery space, and in a new formation. I selected two paintings, *Parallel Lines* and *All That I Have*, that had hung in the first exhibition, to be included in the second show. This time, I situated *Parallel Lines I* close, but perpendicular to, its larger version, so that viewers might shift their gaze from one to the other and consider the relationship between them. I also hung the original version of *All That I Have*—a close-up depiction of a small, pink suitcase as described in Chapter Two—in a salon-style installation with more recent versions of the work on one wall, and one other version facing back to the group from the opposite wall. By placing the various iterations of the work in unconventional positions on the walls, I drew attention to the paintings as objects that were not fixed in place or time, and

that might be considered out of place. One version of the pink suitcase hung high on a wall, out of reach of its viewers; another hung so low that it could have been picked up, like the bag it depicted, and carried off.

With the three-panel work *Take My Hand,* described in Chapter Three, I again used the discordance of perpendicular walls and varying levels to create tension and a sense of transience within the work (Figure 45). This encouraged viewers to seek connections between the three panels and try to determine whether there was a correct or logical sequence to the imagery. By avoiding an ordered placement of the panels next to each other at the same level—the conventional formation of a triptych—I suggested a range of possibilities for how the work could be presented and, implicitly, for how the story could unfold, or in what ways we might "read" the event depicted in the work. The non-traditional presentation of the panels exaggerated the sense of doubt and provisionality in relation to the depicted event.

Figure 45: Exhibition view of *Take My Hand* at Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 2018. Photo by Tania Price.

4.5 Painting as participation

As I worked through the project, I became aware that the process of painting and the hours spent in my studio were my way of reconciling the difficulty and sense of

impotence I felt in dealing with the issues. Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011) argue that we can acknowledge and accept inherent states of anxiety and instability through the materiality of art, and it is its materiality that brings art close to the social and political factors it interacts with. This suggests that paint and its application to canvas—the materiality of painting—provides a point of contact with the issues that are the subject matter of the images.

This idea resonated with my experience of painting in the studio. In studying the source photographs, many of which were disturbing images of people in precarious situations, and in trying to capture the image using paint and brushes and mediums—the materials of painting—I felt like I was part of the story: a participant in the event. Through the activity of painting—in the artist's attempts to create shapes and forms that reflect the subject matter of news photography—the painter works their way through the issues; by painting reality, the painter accepts, acknowledges and engages with that reality.

A "dynamic material exchange" that can "occur between objects, bodies and images" forms the basis of Bolt's (2004, pp. 8-9) concept of painting's performativity. Bolt proposes that a "performative" engagement with the process of painting not only allows "reality to get into images", but the making of images, or the process of imaging, "can produce real material effects in the world". This is made possible not by traditional representation, whereby the artist attempts to order or master the world, but through a relationship of co-responsibility and indebtedness between objects, artists, materials, processes and ideas. It is in the handling of paint that an artist can disrupt the fixity and the objectifying nature of representation criticised by Heidegger and Demos, amongst others. According to Bolt, dealing with the realities of the world through the physical handling of paint involves and engages us with those realities in a way that thinking and knowledge does not.

In the process of painting—in the working of paint onto canvas, in the brushstrokes and rubbing, in the layering and removing, even in the manoeuvring of big, still-tacky canvases around my studio—I engaged with my subject matter. All the steps in the process—the handling of materials, the methods employed, the tools used, and the application of ideas through practice—according to Bolt, contribute to

painting as an experience of, in Heidegger's words, "being-in-the-world" (1962, p. 88). The process of painting provides a means through which the artist can participate in things going on in the world.

4.6 The reality of conflict, tension and antagonism

The subject matter of my paintings—forced migration, illegal border crossings, security threats—is at the centre of global conflict and antagonism between nations, ethnic groups and political parties. As Papastergiadas (2017, p. 16) writes, the twenty-first century has already "been defined by the link between national security and regulating migration". There is "persistent anxiety about the social impact of migration and the status of people on the move". Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011, p. 10) concur with the view that perpetual mobility and impermanence are not exceptional states but, rather, "a normal, generalized process in a world that cannot be grasped in any given notion of stability". They argue that art, by engaging with the inherent instability and anxiety of our world, can provide a means of acceptance and acknowledgement, not only for the artist but also for the viewer.

Bal and Hernández-Navarro argue it is the materiality of art that encourages the participation of its audience: in this way, art operates as performative. This extends Bolt's notion of the performativity and participation of the artist and their materials to that of the audience. The artwork—in my case the painting—requires both my participation in the physical making of the work and the participation of the viewer in engaging with it. By participating in the work—by creating or viewing it—we are participating in the social and political factors with which it interacts. Through its characteristics of materiality, proximity and performativity, art, according to Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011, p. 11), "offers the systematic opposite of the hegemonic use of media, which promotes an illusion of immateriality and distance, an attitude of passive consumption, and a literal, affirmative assumption of reality". By contrast, they claim, art positions migration as the paradigm of our time.

The submitted works reflect the materiality of paint through shifts in texture and technique; they draw attention to the process of applying paint on canvas by

revealing underlayers of unnatural colour and disintegrating illusionism. The close-up encounter with figures and objects that have lost their contextualising backgrounds and disappear beyond the paintings' edges emphasises proximity and encourages the viewer to fill in the missing pieces and make connections. The hegemonic and ubiquitous effect of media imagery is also challenged by the exhibition environment. Each work hangs alone or within a small cluster, illuminated individually, yet inviting a conversation with others that share colour, scale or representative elements.

Rosalyn Deutsche (Bishop 2004, p. 63) refers to artistic images that are, in themselves, social relationships: the viewer is the subject that is constructed by the very object from which, in other circumstances, they might have felt detached. Deutsche's theory suggests that a viewer of a painting based on a real event becomes implicated in the social and political relationships and interactions referred to in the work. By removing contextualising information from the images, I prevent the paintings from being read as a story of a particular event. In shifting perspectives and presenting sections of a once-unified image out of order, or as incomplete, I point to what Deutsche conceptualises as the inevitable and unavoidable conflict, division and instability in our world, and to the viewer's part in that same world (p. 65).

The vivid underpainting and lack of resolution in parts of the paintings defy any attempt to achieve what Claire Bishop (2004, p. 73) refers to as a "harmonious reconciliation" between social systems. Instead, these strategies reflect and sustain the tension between such systems. Bishop argues the social and the aesthetic are intrinsically bound in a "complicated imbrication", that the tension between art and society mirrors the "impossible resolution on which antagonism depends" (p. 78). My aim is to connect viewers with the subject matter of my images and engage them with the reality of world events; the work reflects this sense of impossible resolution. The paintings challenge the passive experience of viewing media imagery, which, as I have argued, generally fails to ignite awareness of, or engagement with, the real state of the world.

Far removed from the realities of the complex circumstances alluded to in the work, the paintings reflect and reinforce our world's inherent tensions, divisions and anxiety. The exhibition context, however, invites an audience to take part in everything

it represents—affluence, social cohesion and order. Presenting the work in the exhibition environment asks us to engage with and acknowledge the conflicting nature of our social and political environment. Demos (2013, p. xxi) argues that "the deepest understanding of reality, particularly a traumatic one, necessitates an engagement with the fictional and conflictual aspects of images". This supports my aim to engage viewers with the paintings by offering them an experience, in order to provide a parallel experience of real things going on in the world.

4.7 Painting conflict

In the wake of an evening terrorist attack on London streets, media attention turned quickly to the religious background and migrant status of the protagonists. My online news feeds were full of images of chaos—photos of traumatised bystanders, desperate survivors and emergency response teams—and of commentary around who the terrorists were and where they came from. I selected a photo because of the eerie artificial lighting and resulting jewel-like colours within the night street scene, and I honed in on a huddle of armed response officers.

The figures in *London Calling* (2018) stand at the forefront and take up most of the image, yet they are anonymous; their few depicted bodily features lack detail (Figure 46). Sections of their clothing and helmets are illuminated, but the paint describes a play of light and colour against a mostly dark mass rather than a comprehensible scene. Without the limited contextual benefit of the work's title, a viewer has few clues to the event they are looking at. But in an exhibition of paintings relating to the global refugee crisis, the work points to the complexity of, and inherent conflict in relation to, the issues.

Figure 46 (left): *London Calling*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 168 x 101 cm.

Figure 47 (right): *Back to the Border*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 122 x 61.5 cm.

Unlike the more layered, textured and heavily worked paint that covers almost the entire surface of *London Calling*—where only the right-hand and bottom edges reveal small gaps of white canvas, suggesting the picture is not complete—I painted *Back to the Border* (2019) in a sketchier way, emphasising the transience and provisionality of the image (Figure 47). Coming or going—in which country, the viewer can only guess—the two uniformed figures with their protective shields are unidentifiable, their bodies disintegrating into black lines on a magenta, yellow and white ground. They, too, are part of the mix of human interaction, antagonism and conflict. The lack of clearly depicted background declares the specifics of their circumstances unimportant.

Writing about his experiences as a border patrol officer, Cantú (2018, p. 1810) refers to Carl Jung's theories about understanding the circumstances of others. Jung urges us to recognise our own nature in that of the other, and to accept evil, along with good, in everything that happens: this helps Cantú make sense of his experience.

4.8 Painting as an event

For Jean Fisher, a viewer must experience an encounter or idea to arrive at something recognisable as the truth. Referring to Heidegger's requirement for art to produce a new formation of reality, Fisher (Medina, Ferguson & Fisher 2007, p. 116) states that art "needs to provide the conditions of an event". The "radical event of art", she argues, causes a crisis, or exposes an absence of meaning, in relation to a situation, which is its truth. Fisher's argument aligns with Crowther's notion of the shock value of an original painting, which I discuss in Chapter Three. Both suggest that, under certain conditions, art can jolt a viewer into a recognition and acknowledgement of a world and a self that are in continuous transformation.

As a result of the two exhibitions I held during the course of this project, it became clear that the affective nature of the paintings could be enhanced by the conditions in which they were experienced. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Johnson disrupts the familiar gallery experience by hanging her canvases in space, rather than on the walls, so that the viewer is required to physically manoeuvre themselves in relation to the work. The canvases are radicalised by being presented in an unexpected and unconventional manner.

I had been thinking about strategies to encourage viewers to question their own position in relation to the paintings and their content when I read an article about the French Neoclassicist painter Jacques-Louis David's use of a mirror to reflect his enormous painting, *The Intervention of the Sabine Woman* (1799). David chose to install the work in an exhibition hall in Paris, on its own but with a large mirror facing back from the opposite end of the space. Julia Wolkoff (2018) notes that, while the drama and political implications of the work would have been clear to its audience, viewers standing in front of the mirror would have seen *themselves* reflected in the scene to scale—"culpable" in the violence of the scene but also in the entreaty for peace that the painting promotes. I decided that using reflective surfaces, positioned near the work to give viewers fragmented glimpses of themselves, would emphasise ideas around our joint complicity in the events of our world.

For my submission exhibition, acrylic mirror attached to the four sides of two central concrete columns in the gallery space allows viewers to see parts of themselves reflected back into the room. As their eyes catch the panels of reflective surface, viewers see themselves—either with wall space or parts of paintings behind them. As they move towards or past the mirrors, they see their position in relation to the paintings change.

4.9 A moving image

The circulation of images is a central concept in much of the work of Tuymans and Richter that I have discussed in the previous chapters. With the physical movement of an artwork, the contextual time and place in which it is viewed and, therefore, its possible interpretations, change. Strategies such as Richter's *editions* emphasise the capacity of an image to take on a life of its own and make a journey—independent of its original version and of the photograph on which the initial painting was based.

Among the permanent exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) Ghent is a fresco by Tuymans that covers three consecutive wall panels, two of which curve as a convex to meet the third, flat wall (Figure 48). Executed in the traditional fresco technique of staining wet plaster after it is applied to the wall surface, *The Arena* (2017) is based on Tuymans' 2014 cycle produced for the Qatar exhibition—itself based on earlier works and photographs of migration events (see Figures 8 and 9). The written description next to the work explains that, in transferring the multi-layered original work to the paintings, Tuymans used cinematic techniques such as editing, panning and close-ups. The three plaster panels depict the same scene, but each one is shown from a different perspective. To enhance the cinematic effect even further, Tuymans chose to create the fresco on the long convex and shorter straight wall, creating an illusion of the images travelling past their viewers in cinemascope. The MSK fresco creates a paradox in relation to the notion of movement and potential: unlike the paintings and film stills on which it is based, the fresco is fixed in the plaster surface of the museum walls. While it suggests motion in the way it requires a viewer to walk along its elongated curve, *The Arena* shares the strong sense of permanence

and stability associated with the ancient, historic religious frescoes of Europe's churches.

Viewing the work and being aware of the way in which Tuymans had continuously repeated and circulated the imagery over decades, I felt as if his subject had at last found a home. That its final destination, embedded in the walls of a museum, should be in Tuymans' home country of Belgium, where thousands of Middle Eastern migrants have sought and continue to seek asylum, added to the layers of meaning in the work. However, my response to MSK's *The Arena* was based strongly on my factual knowledge of Tuymans' previous work and on his commentary; there are layers of significance in the work that are only accessible from previously acquired information. In the absence of that knowledge, I would, without doubt, have responded strongly to the work, if only because of its unusual presentation. But it would have been a different response. Like Richter's *editions*, the work devalues the notion of the painting as a unique, fixed and static image, while at the same time emphasises the concepts of repetition, circulation and transformation.

Figure 48: Luc Tuymans, *The Arena*, 2017. Fresco, installation view at MSK Ghent. Photo by Tania Price.

4.10 Stateless for three days

Before I ever considered applying for Australian citizenship, I travelled on a British passport—thanks to my UK-born grandparents. It was more useful than a passport from my native New Zealand. The visa in my British passport that permitted re-entry to Australia as a resident had been stamped many times. In 1988, I travelled to China—incidentally, my mother's birthplace. For reasons unknown, I was flicking through my passport in a Hong Kong hotel room when I saw that a prominent, red-inked 'CANCELLED' had been stamped diagonally across the re-entry visa. The next three days were spent in the Australian Embassy in Hong Kong trying to prove, via phone calls home to housemates and family requesting verification, that I did in fact live in Australia and that my re-entry visa had been mistakenly and incorrectly cancelled. For three days, there was no country in the world in which I could legally reside. When I returned home, I set in motion the process to become an Australian national. How arbitrary it is—where we are born, where we are allowed to go, and to what piece of land we can officially belong.

As part of the Tunisian exhibition, *An Absence of Paths,* at the 2017 Venice Biennale, visitors could be issued with a 'Universal Travel Document', on which one's only personal identification was an inked thumbprint; every recipient was awarded the status of *migrant*, with origin and destination unknown. Sombrely passing me the document, the official behind the desk said that it was now my responsibility to determine how to use the material I had been issued with. According to the context pages in the document, Queen Elizabeth II is the only person in the world who does not need to carry a passport. It struck me as absurd that all the issues relating to migration that I was engaging with as part of my project could be reduced to the possession, or otherwise, of one small document. I suppose that was the intention of the artwork.

4.11 Painting movement

Still concerned with how to give a sense of movement, as well as potential, to the paintings, I decided to create multiple canvases, each of which would be based on a section of the source photograph used for *Study in Gold.* This would test if, by dividing it into several sections and repeating parts of the original image across canvases, the single image could be made to appear in a state of ongoing motion. This was a similar approach to that employed in *Take My Hand,* where the overlapping elements between the three panels suggest a fragmented and incomplete narrative. This time, it was intended to evoke a greater sense of flow and ongoing possibility.

I used different formal approaches to each of the canvases, testing degrees of indeterminateness so that the paintings still conveyed a comprehensible scene while evoking a sense of movement. Two of the submitted paintings are executed in a similar style and overlap in subject matter as a means to guide the viewer from one to the next. *Study in Gold IV* (2018-19) is dominated by a bright yellow mass of varied brushstrokes that form the shape of a cloaked figure seen from behind (Figure 49). To the left of this mass is a fraction of another figure, most of it disappearing to the left of the frame. The right half of the image is dark, with a deep violet base that contrasts with the yellow. I composed the image this way, with the figures not in the centre as might be expected in a conventional representation, to give an impression that they were still moving and that the frame was unable to capture them frozen in time. Edges and outlines are not well defined, and I have provided little contextual information; it is difficult to determine what the objects and figures in the background are, or what they are doing. In *Study in Gold V* (2019), there is no dominant figure; the only reference to the thermal blankets is a few dabs of yellow in the background (Figure 50). Most of the image is dark and undefined, with light patches on the left revealing two small, silhouetted figures. I used a magenta underpainting, which is revealed in small sections, to more explicitly resist a conventional reading of the background and to suggest alternative interpretations. Hanging together, one reads as a physical shift from the other; either the viewer has moved, or the figures have walked almost entirely out of the frame.

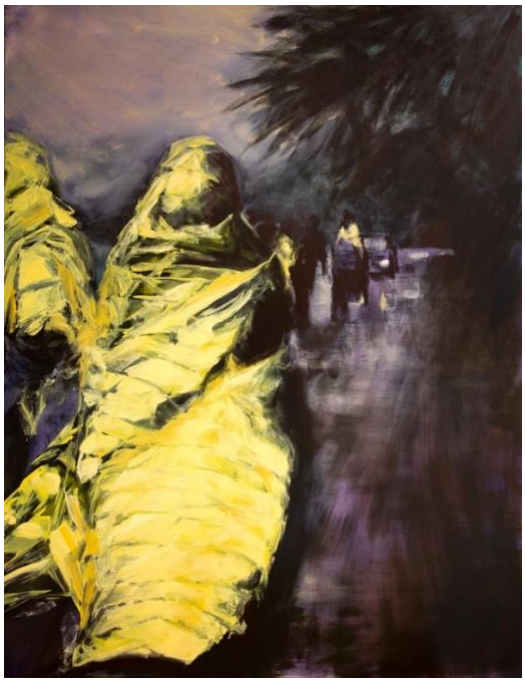


Figure 49 (left): *Study in Gold IV*, 2018-19. Oil on canvas, 153 x 122 cm.

Figure 50 (right): *Study in Gold V*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 153 x 96.5 cm.

In *Study in Gold III* (2018), the emphasis is on the application of paint and tonal shifts more than a depiction of an event (Figure 51). A limited colour range of bronze through to a green-black suggests the play of light on the folds of the thermal blankets but the greenish yellows have an ominous and sickly effect. Movement, urgency and provisionality are suggested through the broad, energetic brushstrokes applied directly to the white canvas, much of which remains exposed. There are no underlying layers of contrasting colour—simply the action of the paint on the canvas.

Figure 51: *Study in Gold III*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 112 x 92 cm.

4.12 Movement as time

The physical process of painting is what most differentiates a painted image of something from a photographic image of the same thing. Bound together in the physical process of painting are factors like the materiality of paint, the unique nature of each individual painting, the time invested in making a painting, and the relationship between the painter and the work. All these elements of the process give painting, according to David Joselit (2013, p. 12), the character of a live medium, which is "on the air". Painting's ability to suggest movement is related to time: Joselit posits that, through the painstaking process of being made, a painting stores or accumulates time; by being installed in a physical space it acts like musical scoring, as marks made over time, with the viewer drawn from canvas to canvas. For Joselit, it is in this way that painting is made performative. Entering into the world or participating in the world as an image in circulation, painting might not mark sensation, he writes, as much as mirror the "spatial anxiety" associated with globalisation and digitisation (p. 19).

The two paintings in my submission, *Study in Gold IV* (2018-19) and *Study in Gold V* (2019), ask the viewer to move from one to the next and register the motion of the figures that ultimately removes them from the painting. A spatial anxiety is also at play in the three-panelled *Take My Hand*, as the figures overlap and repeat, and are awkwardly situated in the close-up segments of an overall scene. The viewer is asked to move back and forward between the panels to make sense of the complete image.

For Isabell Graw (2012, p. 81), it is the "emphatic materiality" of painting that distinguishes it from other mediums as a "manifestation of the artist". Through the time and labour invested in the making, the painter's life, she suggests, is stored in the painting. If we apply this idea of the commitment of the painter—their time and effort—being reflected in the work, to the painting of real events, we can conceive of the sort of reconstruction of reality that Richter describes in relation to his *October 18, 1977* cycle. The events, the painter, the work and, ultimately, the viewer, as they register the marks made over time, become bound together—the barriers between experiences are broken down. Everything and everyone is implicated. For Graw (2012,

pp. 48-50), this is the agency of the painter: the absent painter is present in the painting.

4.13 Hidden process

I have become fascinated by the work of Julie Mehretu, who begins her huge canvases by digitally manipulating news photographs of conflicts, riots and protests, then airbrushing the blurry, washed-out colours onto canvas (Figure 51). She then spends months "complicating" (Cohen 2018, p. 3) the surfaces with hand-drawn and screen-printed marks, some of which are strong and almost violent, forming chaotic whirls, others of which are wispy and fractured. Mehretu (Cohen 2018, p. 4) says that, even in her abstract work, she is thinking about a "bigger political dynamic that's taking place", a stance that is realised formally through her process whereby the original image is embedded in the work, albeit in a way that is obscured to the viewer.

As with Richter's *Birkenau,* without additional contextual information Mehretu's works rely on a viewer's response to formal qualities only. We sense extreme and chaotic movement and flux, but we see no identifiable figures or objects. The fact that Mehretu has manipulated news photographs of actual events and used the resulting abstracted shapes and colours as an underlay is of purely intellectual interest to us. We need to be told about her method of working to understand its significance. We see only colour, shapes and marks; there is no apparent reference to the actual events. The integration of an image of a real event into a painting, however, is important to her; it provides her with a way of making a material connection between the work and a real event.

In Mehretu's work, process is crucial in creating meaning. Months spent reworking, erasing and reconsidering the marks she makes is how she "wrestles the chaos of current events within a fixed space". Alina Cohen (2018, p. 7) writes that "with each glimpse, the works reveal subtle new details and encourage the viewer to reconsider her perceptions—of politics, bodies, art, images—anew".

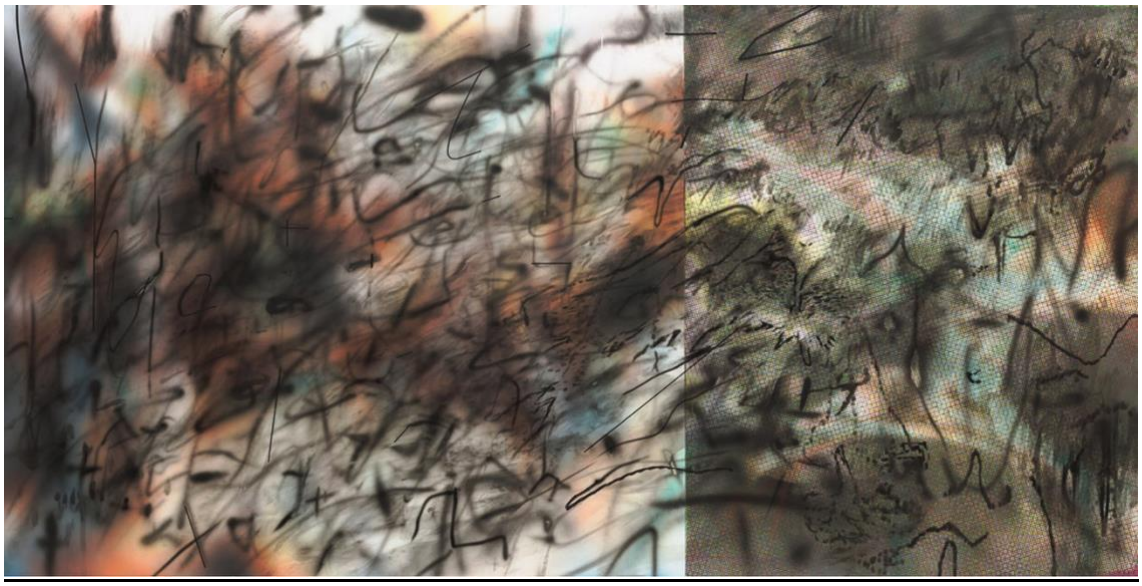


Figure 52: Julie Mehretu, *Conjured Parts (Syria), Aleppo and Damascus*, 2016. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 305.4 cm. ©Julie Mehretu. Photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of the artist, White Cube, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Throughout the project I questioned how much visual information needs to be provided in order for a viewer to make associations with the actual issues to which the paintings allude. According to Crowther (1993, p. 29), a painting plays a galvanising role for the viewer: "Its presence focuses possibilities of action that are at once of personal and more general social significance for the particular embodied subject", he argues. The artist, Crowther suggests, re-presents the world, "so that it is known and responded to in a new way" (p. 67). The painter can take subject matter with which we are familiar—the subject matter of everyday media imagery—and create a work of art that overwhelms our "customary understanding" of it. This can be done through various formal strategies, many of which I have described through my work and that of other artists. In re-presenting the imagery that we view through our media channels, painting can refuse a passive acceptance of the material presented and encourage participation and engagement with the world. "Objectivity in judgement", Crowther (1993, p. 210) posits, "is the projection of a shareable response" that "represents the possibility of fulfilment". Again, the idea of potential arises; painting can generate in the viewer the possibility of a response that makes them feel part of the world and everything going on in it.

4.14 To end

This chapter has considered the significance of concepts relating to movement, potential and performativity as they apply to painting. Using these concepts, I have identified ways in which painting can operate to engage both artist and viewer in the subject matter of the work in a personal and meaningful way. I have outlined strategies used by other artists, as well as those that I have tested, considered and adopted, in order to find ways to create a sense of potential and ongoing opportunity for all participants in the process of making, exhibiting and viewing paintings.

Conclusion

A central aim of this project has been to investigate the ways in which painting can acknowledge and help overcome the inherent distancing effect of the media in how we respond to and understand major global events and current affairs. I set out to explore how painting could engage its audience in issues and crisis situations in a way that draws attention to the nature of our relationship with the subject matter of the daily news. By painting from media photographs and video stills, as well as from photographs taken when I encountered residual activity related to my subject matter of the global refugee crisis, I considered how we experience and develop views on newsworthy issues and events.

It was the studio experience—from the selection and cropping of source imagery to the physical process of painting—that increasingly engendered a sense of involvement with the issues associated with the subject matter. I became a participant rather than an observer. As the practical research progressed, I identified how the paintings could operate to invite a viewer to spend time with, and find within them, an opportunity to reflect, query, sense or respond in ways that do not usually occur in the daily consumption of media imagery. In order to avoid the paintings being read as factual representations of real events, I tested a range of formal strategies: I made some elements within a scene too indefinite to be readily identified; I honed in on parts of an image that were not the focus of the original photograph; I left areas unfinished; I repeated and overlapped sections of an original image across several canvases. Similar strategies are used by artists whose work I have discussed, and they operate to achieve various effects.

Ultimately, with the help of theorists including Boehm, Foucault and Bolt, I have identified the themes of *movement*, *potential* and *performativity* as being critical to both the artist and audience experience of painting and, therefore, to their experience of the work's subject matter. Movement is central to the issue of mass migration and the global refugee crisis, so to evoke a sense of movement in the paintings, and through their exhibition, was important in enabling an audience to make connections between their experience of viewing the work and the

circumstances represented. Some of the paintings suggest movement, or a restriction of movement, through their composition, which draws attention to barriers or, as in the two versions of *Parallel Lines*, the endless railway tracks that head towards an unseen horizon. Others, such as *Back to the Border* and *Study in Gold IV* and *V*, evoke a sense of movement through the way in which paint is applied—the brushstrokes themselves suggest motion. In many of the paintings, figures appear to have moved outside the frame; the activity is occurring beyond the canvas.

Movement suggests potential, and potential implies alternative outcomes and opportunities. It was the effect of underpainted sections in a magenta hue, left exposed beneath a painted image of an actual event, that clarified what painting could bring to the consideration of an issue. The contrasting underpainting that ruptures the visual description of a scene suggests unresolved tensions and provisional circumstances, but also the potential for other possibilities. The areas of a painting where the representational image falters and implies that something beyond the perceived "picture" is happening—that there are layers of meaning beneath the factual image—are where the potential for other interpretations lie. If a viewer is able to get a sense of potential from a painting, then they can, like the painter, engage in the complexities and reality of situations from which they are otherwise distant, both literally and metaphorically. The patches of magenta underpainting in *What Should We Take* and *Parallel Lines I*, the unfinished sections of *Take My Hand,* and the sketchy, incomplete *Back to the Border* invite viewers to continue constructing the picture; they are asked to fill in the gaps. With *Take My Hand,* viewers are encouraged to imagine alternative ordering and placement of the three panels, as no one combination makes total visual sense. The viewer, like the painter, can participate in the creation of alternative possibilities.

The notion of performativity, in which the painter engages in an encounter with all the elements involved in the making of a painting, can apply to the viewer as well. By drawing together the theoretical propositions of Bolt, Crowther, Bal and Hernández-Navarro, amongst others, I have argued that the artist presents a painting in the form of an invitation. If the viewer chooses to accept it, they enter into a dynamic space in which the performance can continue and, like the artist, they

become a participant. Artist and viewer, therefore, can collaborate in the formation of alternative interpretations, outcomes and opportunities. The paintings invite the viewer to participate by evoking a sense of movement and potential through shifts in perspective, incomplete sections and repeated segments. My actions, decisions and investment of time and energy—all elements of the painter's performance—are also reflected in the brushstrokes, the unfinished areas, the attention to some details and not to others, and the obsessive repetition. Performatively applies equally to painters who work from material sourced by others and those who have direct experience of the situations they depict. In this way the delineation between the two groups that I refer to is made irrelevant.

Formal strategies employed in the painting process are enhanced by the exhibition setting. If the paintings are installed in ways that create an engaging experience—that intrigue the audience—and if viewers are encouraged to see themselves as part of the work, then they might accept the invitation. The mirrored panels that wrap around square concrete columns within the submission exhibition space are designed to reflect back to a viewer parts of their own body seen in relation to some of the paintings and figures within the space. The paintings are not evenly spaced around the walls. This suggests circumstances, like those of their subject matter, that are not stable or certain. In one small room of the exhibition space, the audience is surrounded by multiple versions of *All That I Have* and asked to consider which, if any, tells the full story.

In Chapter Two, I raise Geimer's question of whether media criticality, rather than the subject matter of the original image, is the primary content of paintings based on photographs of real events. Geimer argues that the painting of reality today is primarily a challenge to photography's right to dictate how we see and interpret the world. My answer to his question is addressed by my central argument. While paintings that portray recognisable situations from around the world are likely to provoke critical reflection of our interaction with the news media, regardless of how explicitly they allude to their photographic sources, they can also operate to close the gap between their audience and the depicted situation. They can both challenge a viewer to consider how they read images and understand world events, as well as

provide an opportunity for a meaningful and personal engagement with the circumstances of others.

By inviting a more intense engagement, painting can also address the ethical dilemmas that I have raised. If painting can bring together all participants on equal terms, and provide an opportunity for deeper understanding, new knowledge and an awareness of our humanity as a common platform, it might help overcome the problems of superiority and dominance associated with conventional representation, as outlined by Demos amongst others. Demos calls for reality to be treated as an effect to be produced rather than a fact to be understood. It is the effect of the formal tactics employed in the submitted work and the exhibition context that operates as an invitation to viewers to spend time and engage with the images, take on responsibility for imagining alternative possibilities and outcomes, and see themselves as part of a world characterised by migration and its associated issues.

There are many artists working in the field of representing the contentious, politicised and traumatic events and issues of our world. I set a constraint on the research, which was to base all the paintings on existing photographs, regardless of whether they were from the media or taken from personal experience. Several painters who base their work on pre-existing images have been discussed. For Tuymans, the work's content is more about the continuing life of the image and its capacity for reinterpretation than about the subject matter depicted. Richter's *October 18, 1977* cycle emphasises the relationship between painting and photography while addressing the impossibility of comprehending why some things happen. Through its focus on movement, tension, incompleteness and provisionality, my project demonstrates that painting can draw attention to the nature of the image and how we consume imagery, as well as enable a renewed and reimagined engagement with the actual subject matter.

I have identified and employed pictorial devices that suggest states that are characteristic of the migratory and related issues at the core of my subject matter. In *Walk on By* and *Wrong Time, Wrong Place*—executed before I had identified movement and potential as states evoked through the strategies outlined—viewers are invited to identify with, and consider the circumstances of, the subject matter by

being brought into close proximity to the action while being offered little explanatory information. These devices, too, can operate to intensify an audience experience of issues relating to the global refugee crisis, encourage viewers to consider their relationship to those involved, and alert us to our part in a shared humanity.

The concept of participation in real things going on the world, through the vehicle of painting, has generated an interest in pursuing this performative aspect of the medium. In an increasingly globalised world, further research into how painting can provide opportunities to engage audiences in social, cultural and political issues might help maintain painting's relevance as a dynamic artform. The outcomes of this project have inspired me to consider further how painting can operate to help overcome barriers between communities by promoting an understanding and acknowledgment of the inherent differences and tensions—but also potential—within and between us.

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